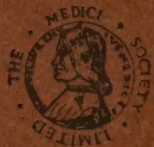


VINCENT VAN GOGH

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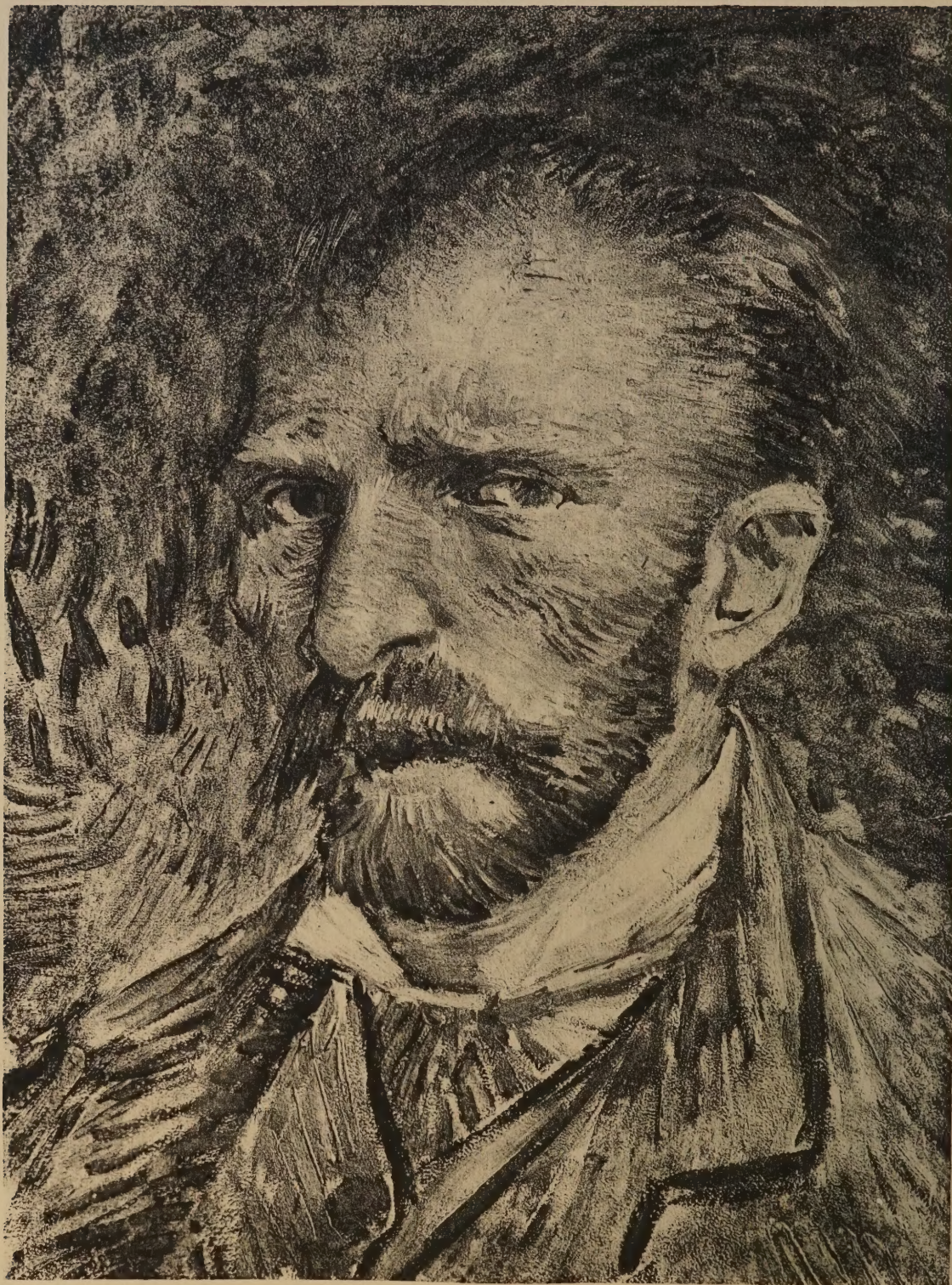
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VINCENT VAN GOGH



PORTRAIT OF THE PAINTER

1886/87

VINCENT VAN GOGH

A BIOGRAPHICAL STUDY BY
JULIUS MEIER-GRAEFE

Translated by

JOHN HOLROYD REECE

With One Hundred and Two
Illustrations after the works of
the Artist



Volume One

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Translator's Note

JULIUS MEIER-GRAEFE is an author who has made a unique position for himself, not only as a critic, but as a writer of fine prose. His style is as remarkable as his mind, and these factors combine to render the adequate translation of his works peculiarly difficult. The forcefulness which lends character to the original text has no precise equivalent in English prose, because the author has employed what can only be termed slang, and he has relied largely upon a manner of expression which depends for its effect upon a subtle play of German words. His finest passages reveal their merit as much in what the author has left to be understood as in the actual phrases he has written; and he has created a new phenomenon in contemporary German literature by the vital rhythm he has given to the construction of his sentences.

It is not the intention of the translator to praise the merits of the original text in such a way that his praise shall thinly veil an apologia for his own shortcomings, but it is proposed to give the reader a clue, to enable him to enter as fully as possible into the spirit of the original text.

Translation in the ordinary sense was clearly impossible, and the only solution I could find was to read the original until I had virtually committed the book to memory. I then took notes in English as if I were attending a lecture, and having completed my notes, closed the German book and wrote the first draft with the aid of my notes only. It had been my intention to write a very free translation, but when I re-read the original by the side of my manuscript I was amazed to find that what I had hoped would be a free rendering was almost an exact transcription of every phrase and every word of the original. I was horrified, but all efforts at freedom of rendering proved a failure.

Translator's Note

Eventually I came to the conclusion that an English ghost of the spirit of Meier-Graefe had taken possession of me, and that, whatever the demerits of my manuscript may be, the method I was forced to adopt reflected the most essential characteristics of the original better than any other means at my disposal.

Having learnt to appreciate the beauties of Meier-Graefe's text, I hardly dared to send my manuscript to the publisher, and but for the assistance and encouragement I received from my wife and Mr. H. W. Lawrence I never would have done. My wife re-wrote the first draft and improved it by the comparatively simple method of altering it beyond recognition, and the later drafts would never have been written at all if Mr. Lawrence had not encouraged me and helped me constantly by his suggestions and corrections.

Such pleasure as the reader may derive from the book is due to qualities in the original so powerful as to break through the obstacles my translation presents, but if the reader can derive a portion of the enjoyment which the work of translation brought me, his labours will have been amply rewarded.

J. HOLROYD REECE.

15 Grove Park,
Liverpool.

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Introduction

THIS is the story of a man who lived from the year 1853 to the year 1890. The events of his life, his actions and his words are not imaginary but real. His name was Vincent van Gogh, and he was what you call an artist, a description that may mean anything. In this case it means a drama, a queer eventful history full of strange happenings. The action here related came to an end only a generation ago, although it seems as remote as the legend of St. George and the Dragon. The charm of our story, like that of any other, depends upon its presentation. The motives of our hero must appear, why he acted as he did, and the manner in which he expressed himself and his ideas. In the present case the story is not the work of any alien hand, but was in the main left by our hero himself. He acted the drama, wrote down most of it, and himself through the medium of a transparent symbolism pointed the moral. The text of the play, his letters to his friends, and especially those to his brother, has been published long ago both in the original and in an English translation. Their author, needless to say, never desired either to enact or to write this drama; in fact he longed only to live a quiet life, enduring not too much sorrow and enjoying some measure of happiness. He failed of his intentions as signally as he succeeded with his play.

The function of the present author has been confined to purging the play of superfluities and to filling out the gaps. The lines of the letters and what is written between them are the threads of the story, the rest has been gathered from the symbols already mentioned, which are the works of the painter. No attempt has been made to make a critical analysis of the pictures, which enter upon the scene only in so far as

Introduction

they concern the drama directly or indirectly. It is an open question whether the correct title has been found for our play. Vincent is its dynamic force and his name should suffice, but since a certain duality is of the essence of the piece it might have been better to call it 'Vincent and Theo,' thereby honouring the only man who attempted to approach to the heart of Vincent van Gogh. Theo was his brother, a plain man and yet a mystery. The play might also have been called 'Vincent and the Universe,' or even 'Vincent and God.'

Chapter I
The Uncertain Quest



IN CHURCH
1881/82

Chapter I

The Uncertain Quest

VINCENT was born on March 30th 1853, in the rectory of Zundert in Brabant. His father was a quiet dignified ordinary man, from whom Vincent inherited nothing but a burning desire to enter the Church. This desire forms the background to our first act. His mother gave him his appearance, his sensibility and such powers as had to serve him through life. Her portrait suggests that she was a peasant, but she belonged, like her husband, to a cultured middle-class. Vincent looked like a peasant, who by an unkindly trick of fate had become a townsman, and for this reason perhaps he never appeared to best advantage. He was starved. His drama is a drama of starvation. Vincent longed for almost everything a man can long for, and it so happened that the objects of his desires did not appear to him to be altogether unattainable. In the light in which he regarded them, his desires were as legitimate and reasonable as his right to earn a daily wage. The first article of his faith was—I believe. This faith was not a toy for his leisure, but Vincent's only demand upon life. This need was far more imperious than any material demand of his physical senses. As a result he starved all his life. From the moment he became conscious of his existence the pangs of hunger never left him. The world beat him as Don Quixote was beaten, but the world's blows and his parries were more actual than the deeds of Cervantes' hero. But here is no phantasy: Vincent's illusions were almost tangible. Almost! The thread of probability was drawn so taut, the motive power was so great, that even after his downfall he starved

Vincent van Gogh

desires remain a force as immortal and as noble as the aspirations of the Spanish grandee.

He longed for the world of men. Life without them was blank. Vincent demonstrated this theme in three or four professions, each of which is a separate act, rich in its variety of incident. He will appear in his relations to his parents, his brother, the women he loved, his teacher and his friend. These relationships, apart from the one to his brother, all alike ended in failure. Even his brother was an exception only by comparison. Art was Vincent's final profession, in which some time after his death he became famous. He never was an artist in our sense of that term, for is it not supposed to imply a form of accentuated self-consciousness? Nothing was less accentuated than Vincent's self-consciousness. Artists are gifted too with certain playful, poetic, inventive qualities, and with talent, but of these powers he possessed less than the average man. But if the word artist denotes supreme self-sacrifice and the ability to give oneself up unreservedly for the world and for the service of humanity; if it is a synonym for a man of such moral tenor that he only sets a further goal to his aspiration as his consciousness gains in the deepening perception of Nature and her laws, then Vincent was an artist and the greatest of our time.

At the age of sixteen he started life as an art-dealer's assistant. This choice was not determined by any desire to be in some way associated with art, as if creative faculties had been denied him and he hoped by this means eventually to become an artist. He never even dreamed that he would want creative faculties. He did not fill his exercise books with drawings instead of Latin or algebra, and this generally accepted genesis of an artist's career was not Vincent's. The forces which led him to picture-dealing were more or less external. Three of his father's



BIRDS' NESTS

1882

The Uncertain Quest

brothers were art-dealers, and he was christened after the most distinguished of his uncles, who was the manager of the Hague branch of the famous Goupil Galleries. His parents were without means, his rich uncle offered to take the boy in, and Vincent became an apprentice. If the uncle had dealt in coal, Vincent would have learnt that trade. The mere superficial contact with art sufficed to inflame his ideals. He saw in art a nobility, which he discerned in a purer and more convincing form in his father's calling, but art revealed no other quality to him. The only profession to which he felt called, and for which he longed, was the Church. He only refrained from entering it because he was shy of everything sacred; he felt that so ugly and so lowly a man as himself might not approach the Divine more nearly. His modesty, immaturity and poverty formed the obstacles. Dealing in pictures seemed to impose upon him the duty of proclaiming in his own way that austere nobility which art had revealed to him. And it so happened that his inexperience led him to think that this quality could be found in good pictures and that his uncle dealt in them. He found what he longed for in works of very dubious merit. Jules Breton and Rembrandt seemed equally admirable and his horizon never extended beyond Millet. Pretentiously designed rubbish enchanted him. He stayed at The Hague for four years and enjoyed his time. It was no mean honour to be employed by such a distinguished firm. He was, as it were, in a well-equipped yacht which slipped smoothly through the waters of the world. He was happy in his quiet home with his father and mother, and young Theo was already his confidant, with whom he had arrived at agreement upon a number of serious subjects. Theo was the more thoughtful of the two; he also wanted to become a dealer and was destined to join the Brussels branch of the firm. He had the gift of

Vincent van Gogh

vision and rapidly acquired the knowledge his brother could impart. Business of this kind meant contact with the noblest products of the human spirit and its conduct was a high office, of which one had to be worthy. Dealing in pictures was part of art, and belonged in no way to the common struggle for worldly goods. It was the office of the watchman who guards the bridge between the artist and the layman—a duty full of responsibility. The time might come when they could take the burthen of material care from an unknown, unrecognized master, and smooth his approach to the heart of the community. They laid great plans and discussed the problems of humanity during their evening strolls. Theo was inclined to be sceptical. The world and art were at enmity. Vincent saw in art only purified and intensified humanity, therefore the interaction of these forces should produce harmony. Of course many people knew nothing of art, and lived in darkness. They must be guided. Few knew the path of virtue, and for that reason they sinned. The path must be shown.

One day they wandered together to the old mill at Rijswijk. If only ten people could be found in every country to come together with the simple intention of working for good, the world would blossom like a flower. Under the shadow of the mill these brothers pledged one another to strive all their lives only for good. It remained to be seen whether the good was attainable, but they could at any rate aspire to it with all their might. It was a promise, more, an oath.

At the age of twenty Vincent was sent by way of Paris into the London branch of the firm. He wore a top hat like an Englishman and became the perfect assistant. In his free time he devoured books, and betrayed a particular passion for poetry. During his evenings he discussed what he read with the ladies at whose house he lodged. These



THE EDGE OF THE FOREST

1883/84

The Uncertain Quest

evenings were perfect. There was a young girl there—an angel. She was surrounded with little children whom she educated. What a joy to watch her! What incredible bliss to love such a perfect creature! If it were not quite beyond the bounds of the credible you might turn artist, just to satisfy the profound desire to communicate such happiness. He drew his room to amplify his letters and to let his family participate in his life in London. What a divine world! Her name was Ursula.

Destiny had chosen other paths for him. One day after months of happiness it appeared that the girl had been engaged long ago. It had never occurred to him to ask her, for were such questions not superfluous? The girl he loved was bound to love him. Such things were surely not dependent upon mere chance. He was perfectly serious in his beliefs, for such was the faith to which he had pledged himself at Rijswijk.

This affair had disproportionate results. He was stung, and the sting awoke him. Was happiness not the portion and the duty of man? Vincent, whose life had not known care, became pensive; he withdrew from the outer world and buried himself in his books. The girl was not to blame. He did not harbour a single unkindly thought towards her, on the contrary he felt grateful. She had entered his life at a crucial moment, but now he must change. He must become a better man, be sterner with himself and renounce all selfish desires. Christ was the example, the teacher. So far he had been one of a million of assistants, but his expression changed and the change had a bad effect upon his customers. Not that he became slack, his ardour was trebled. He argued with collectors instead of selling them engravings. He tried to rouse their sensibility, and met lack of understanding with angry

Vincent van Gogh

opposition. His appearance was against him. His angular head was covered with red hair. Small eyes glittered below his enormous square forehead. His cheek bones protruded more and more. His contracted lips seemed a trap which held his speech silent, and when he spoke he spat out a string of disorderly words. His kindly chief, Obach, tried to talk to him. Vincent failed to understand, and allowed himself to argue the point. A day came when he began to talk not of art but the Bible. In 1875 it was settled that he should join the branch in Paris. But even if Goupil had had a hundred branches, it would not have improved the situation. The sting had gone deep. In Paris the rift between his inner and his assumed life became an abyss. He learnt the art of picture-dealing thoroughly, and he stiffened with contempt. Men who dealt in divinity as though it were dirt disgusted him. His silent days were spent in the fashionable shop; at night he intoxicated himself with hymns in his dingy rooms in Montmartre. Where, where was God? Nowhere in that desert of a city. But there were at least works of art by pure-souled men, Millet, Corot, Delacroix. There were rooms in the Louvre which were very temples of sanctity. Happily there were also photographs which he nailed up in his lodgings to cleanse his vision from the dirt of the day. Happily there were Renan, Michelet, Zola, to purge his ears from the evil sounds of the day; happily there was his pipe.

At last Goupil's managers gave him notice, and Vincent breathed again. His presence had only been suffered for the sake of the Dutch partner. In the spring of the year 1876 he accepted a post in England as a teacher of languages, and shortly afterwards became a kind of assistant preacher in a Methodist school in Isleworth. He ought of course to study and pass examinations if he hoped for advancement in his new

The Uncertain Quest

position. But are there any fixed rules to guide a prophet in his mission? Inspiration came from within, and there Vincent felt it. The fervour of his message seemed to burn his lips, yet could not pass them. Others mistook his silence for pride, and his harsh manner confirmed their impression. His head and his heart throbbed but speech was denied him. Perhaps he could write, if only he could write to every one! Perhaps he ought to turn author? His correspondence with his family took the place of conversation. He wrote home letters that glowed with kindness, yet face to face with his own flesh and blood Vincent was quarrelsome, hypersensitive and rude. His withdrawal into himself already exacted its toll of misery. This strong-limbed creature whose pulses beat so mightily was slave to printed paper. His intercourse with the world was confined to books, letters, reproductions and he calmed his longings with religious aspiration. His thoughts were his food. What was to happen? Vincent's parents were worried about their son, who at the age of twenty was already a misfit. The intuition of a mother divined what ailed him. She wrote that he 'ought to live either with Nature or for Art,' and so named the two great healing forces which the instincts of her son demanded, while he tortured his spirit with monastic yearnings. He did indeed love Nature, and Art was the throne of his Maker, but few were chosen. He was too evil; religion alone could help him. Religion was not a narrow moral law, but rather the faith of a hero worshipper. Christ, the hero from the stable, was his ideal. Christ's love was great enough to embrace mankind in one community. Vincent felt within himself a love capable of all sacrifice, but he despaired because the use of his talent was denied him by his constitutional roughness and his uncouth appearance. When he tried to approach his fellows they fled before some hidden force within him. His love for

Vincent van Gogh

them scorched him, and yet when he drew near them he was met with cold antagonism. He read the Bible to overcome his sin. Christ was the Teacher from whom he could learn how to love aright. Artists somehow possessed the great secret, and he read about them to discover it. He knew every word Millet had spoken. He loved Breton because he painted and wrote. The sensuous element in Art would have seemed to him a deadly sin. Art was justified only because it was an equivalent to, and derived from, the love men bore their God. In the meantime his vision had gained by experience, and his critical faculty was developing. He remained faithful to Breton and other doubtful worthies, but his new loves were among the mighty. The only idea which never occurred to him was that he might himself paint some day. Occasionally he sketched a little, but only to illustrate something for his family. He drew like a child and yet his painstaking efforts reveal at once the basis on which his subsequent style was built. He may sometimes, in his dreams, have seen his efforts at drawing put to other uses, but when he woke he denounced himself for self-deception and arrogance. All he could hope for was to be a simple labourer in Christ. The ideal would be to become like his father, a balanced personality, beloved by every one. There was something holy in the modest beauty of this country pastor. His father was not a very important divine, otherwise he would not have remained in the smallest village rectory, but he was pure. The words of the Bible flowed from Vincent's lips like music; he added but few words of his own, but then it was not necessary to add anything to the sayings of Christ. Man could only hope to be his Saviour's mouth-piece, and confirm the power of Holy Writ by the purity of his actions.

At that time every line of the Bible inspired him, and he suspected some unselfish conviction behind everything that was said by the



STILL LIFE

1884/85

The Uncertain Quest

pastors he met in the rectory. Every word his father breathed sanctified the air. There must be something unclean in Vincent, otherwise his fellows would love him too. He was seized by a desire for self-immolation. He must seek out his God. Men who knew of Him and did not attempt to draw nearer to Him were surely the worst of criminals.

His father could not disapprove of Vincent's leanings. In fact, it might have given him pleasure to have such a God-fearing man for his son, only every act of Vincent's was so violent, so exaggerated. Of course one must render to God all that one has and do one's duty, but the bounds of possibility are to be taken into account, one's fellow-men, and surrounding circumstances. Every day made it more difficult to discuss religion with his son, who ignored all obstacles in his desire to approach God directly—as if God were waiting there for him. He spoke of Christ as if He shared his bedroom. He talked as if other people, including even the clergy, lived in the outer darkness of a misguided faith. His father was also alarmed by the unexpected evidence brought forward by his son for the love of God. Vincent quoted the phrases of barely reputable poets with as much fervour as if he were citing the Sermon on the Mount. This confusion of sanctity and profanity was a pose. It was merely capricious to demand that all the practical details of everyday life should be guided by the Ten Commandments. Everything was exaggerated. Love of God must not be a furnace, but a hearth heaped with glowing coals. Nevertheless he could not feel justified in opposing Vincent's desire to enter the Church, as he appeared unfit for any other career, and so in 1877 he gave his consent. At last Vincent's feet were set upon the narrow path which would lead him to the figure of Christ crucified.

This transition implied no change of occupation for Vincent, but

Vincent van Gogh

merely a further revelation of his inner calling. At any rate he saw it in that light. He undertook his duties with a holy glee, and though he could not hope to be either as pure or as upright as his father, he might perhaps move his congregation more deeply and work harder outside his church among the parishioners. These considerations, of course, belonged to the distant future, for you must study before taking Holy Orders. Many things go to the making of a pastor which really have mighty little to do with religion. He would enjoy the study of the Bible, he could never have too much of that. But before you came to the Bible you must learn old languages. He spent a year in Amsterdam preparing himself with a kindly teacher. He showed determination, industry and self-denial, and did not allow himself the slightest worldly distraction, even the most innocent. He spent the few pence he managed to save, as before, on prints and photographs after the great masters, and he bought the works of Zola, which to him involved no deviation from the straight and narrow path. The art of Zola was as pious as a hymn book, although his father could not see it, but it made studying much harder. God kept on pulling him away from his Greek grammar to his fellow-men. While he ground at his books the passion of Christ shone down at him from a reproduction of a Rembrandt. Could these complex syntactical regulations aid him in the attainment of salvation? His father did not need foreign languages to comfort his peasants. All these rules were made by people whose heads were stuffed with formulæ instead of human needs. They were invented to create a barrier between man and his Maker, between human beings and humanity. These weary years of preparation could only serve to chill the fervour that bound you to your calling. There were times when Vincent raged against this theological apparatus. He examined the machine more closely. Many a religious



PEELING POTATOES
CHARCOAL 1883

The Uncertain Quest

ceremony had come to be only the clacking of a prayer-wheel. Even in this holy calling there were men who traded in divinity. It would be wiser to repress such thoughts, but it would also be dishonest not to express your convictions. There were incidents which might damp your ardour for your vocation, but perhaps they were part of your novitiate. His ardour remained, and surely his purification was at hand. His piety lost its previous exaggeration. He did not evade any opportunity of speaking of God, but he plumbed profounder depths. The cue to such opportunity was afforded less and less frequently by religious ecstasy, and more and more often by the divine realm of the creation, by the perfection of nature, and by the works of blessed mortals. His letters of this period did not betray the theologian, but were pictures clothed in words. He conveyed the colour and the tone of the landscape to his brother by reference to paintings. Churches and cottages like Bos-boem's, trees like those in certain prints of Durer, the colour of an undulating plain like that in one of the pictures of the elder Breughel, Christ like the Christ of Rembrandt. His correspondence was a fluid mixture of art and nature, of experience and reminiscence, of simplicity and intelligence. Some power stirred in Vincent's being which he failed to identify, but it urged him on with a will.

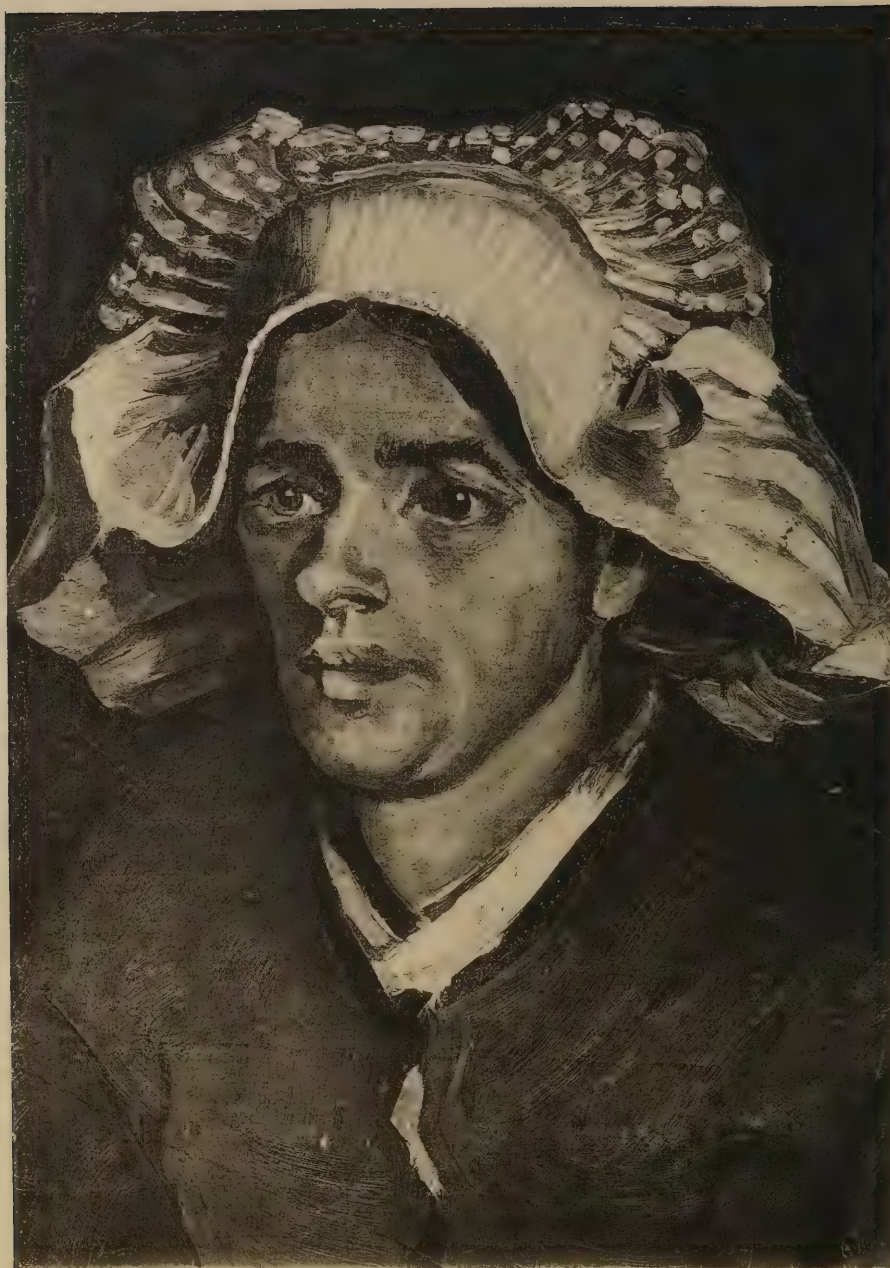
Theo, who had always suspected the artist in Vincent, advised him to make drawings of the landscapes he admired. Vincent replied that he thought he would occasionally do so, and he enclosed a drawing of a very pleasing scene. 'But as it might keep me from my real work, it is better perhaps not to begin this sort of thing. When I got home I started a sermon on the unfruitful fig-tree. Luke xii. 1-9.'

If only he might follow his own way in his studies! Study was all very well to exercise your mind, and Theology was especially good for people

Vincent van Gogh

who wanted to learn about religion, not work in it and for it. He would never be a scholarly divine. Moreover he did not possess the means for so many years of University life, and even if he did he could not be penned behind walls for so long. Very well then, he would not become a pastor, but a helper, a lay-preacher. Lowly as he was, he could only speak to the lowly, for instance, to the miners. These people underground who live in darkness must need light more than others. In a small geography book he had read of the suffering inhabitants of La Borinage, in Belgium. They must be curious people and it was to them that he would carry the Gospel. His father was obliged to give his consent. Even if a lay-preacher would scarcely add to the laurels of the family, his son Vincent might perhaps work out his own salvation in this way. God be with him!

Even missionaries to La Borinage had to submit to rules and regulations. Vincent had to spend a few months in the School for Missionaries in Brussels. Once more he had to be imprisoned behind walls, but this time it would be endurable. He worked hard. There was really only one fault to find with him: he had to read his sermons and could not deliver them extempore. How it humiliated him! In other respects he was the best pupil at the school, but there was something in his manner, in his slovenly dress, which the respectable headmaster could not quite approve. Moreover his powers of physical resistance did not appear to be unlimited. He suffered already from nervous crises. He was allowed to go to La Borinage provisionally in the winter of 1878. At last! Van Gogh entered this dark region as if he were entering the Holy Land. The simple people, he had always known it, delighted him and he them. His curse seemed to be dispelled. He held Bible classes, preached, taught, visited the sick, and helped and comforted them. He stayed



A PEASANT GIRL

1885

The Uncertain Quest

there for nearly two years. He did not find his surroundings sombre. The dusk contained rich tones with which he became as familiar as if he had never lived anywhere else. These people developed finer expressions beneath the coal dust than the people in the towns. Strong lines, graved by danger and necessity, marked their faces. They were rough and crude, but never false. For the first time in his life Vincent came into contact with men who did not judge him by the carelessness of his dress, men and women with whom you could be natural and without fear, people who were poor like himself. The nature and the manner of all intercourse was determined, not by conventions, but by necessity. He took his duties as seriously as the men their work. Variety was unheard of in this black hole, and he would have preferred to deny himself even what brought comfort to his mind more readily than to theirs, in order to be at one with his community.

Everything would have gone smoothly but for the authorities in Brussels. They disapproved of the newcomer because he did not abide by their routine, because he made himself too cheap with the people, and because he shared their miserable existence. After all Vincent had been sent there only on probation, and on condition that he adhered to his routine like a proper lay-preacher. He would have done so if only the surrounding misery had not been so profound. There were some wretches in the village even poorer than he was. They suffered, starved, were without bed or clothes. Vincent forgot the authorities, forgot his promises to them, and remembered only the teachings of Christ. He gave away his money, his clothes and at last even his bed. What a scandal! Perhaps he betrayed too much sympathy with the people after the catastrophe caused by the lightning in the summer of 1879, and perhaps even he did not turn his back on the miners when, shortly

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afterwards, they called a strike. He was given notice, and was allowed to preach no longer.

That was the end of this Church business. It was a bitter disappointment to our disciple, but a blessing for our hero. Not that the disciple in him ceased to exist. On the contrary, he merely entered upon a much profounder phase; he dispensed with all claptrap, and also with a number of conventions, without which intercourse with people outside was made more difficult. He had finished with the Church and with his father's calling. The much-vaunted balance of personality was the result merely of lack of sympathy. The teachings of Jesus and the love of the poor and oppressed were right enough, but Christianity as understood by properly dressed folk was a swindle. He remained in La Borinage. Why? Because he loved these men, these miners in whose cottages he lived, and for whom life smiled so rarely. He ceased to talk to them of the Bible, because he had become suspicious of all talk. He was workless and defenceless from starvation. He was quite used to living on bread, but he had to forego even that for days together. This is what happens if you do not conform to the recognized code. His family despaired of saving him. Even Theo, who had been his one anchor, lost faith. Bitter letters were exchanged. Theo had been promoted to the head office in the meantime, and was making good progress. It was tempting to draw comparisons. Theo was by no means conceited, but it was a fact that he was at the head office of the best firm of its kind in the world, while his elder brother who had started before him, who was more gifted, and whose ambition had aimed so much higher, now sat in this black hole and could not and would not get out of it. It was a disgrace. The younger reproached the elder brother severely. There was no point in Vincent's existence, for reading

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books was after all not an occupation, and his philosophy of life did not earn him a living. All this talk of religion was merely an excuse to conceal the fact that he didn't want to work or to take his part in life. He took a positive pleasure in despair, and was merely a peculiar idler, a kind of shareholder in misery. No sooner had he stretched forth his hand than he took it from the plough. This was the third time! From the moment when he left the Goupil Gallery he had sunk lower and lower. His parents had offered to take him back to Holland, where he could be near them again. He did not even answer their letters. What was he up to in that evil place?

Vincent stayed in his black hole. There were two ways of looking at most problems. There was, for instance, a perfectly tenable point of view from which Theo's activity at the Goupil Gallery appeared irrelevant although it merited, no doubt, the praise of every respectable citizen. It might be advisable too, before pronouncing judgment on men and circumstances which you were incapable of understanding, to remove the beam from your own eye.

Theo took no notice, but Vincent's intercourse with his family came to a standstill. His parents were not embittered so much by his incapacity as by his manifest lack of any desire to improve his situation. And to think of all the sacrifices that had been made for him! Even as a child he had been the constant subject of special consideration. Into the bargain Vincent's arrogance made him almost unbearable. You wanted to help him, if only for the sake of the family whose history had been irreproachable for generations without number, but he did not even want to be helped. He suggested cynically that the family could only supply him with bread, if you lacked that there was nothing you could do for him. Your advice was regarded as charlatanism, like the

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rest of your existence. He admitted his own faults, disliked them, but he maintained that at any rate he was conscious of them, and then suggested that you should make the acquaintance of your own. He did not put it quite so crudely, but you could easily interpret his meaning.

In the spring of 1880 he suddenly arrived at Etten. Good morning! How do you do? Just as if nothing had happened! His father felt inclined to forgive him and spoke of the return of the prodigal son, but the prodigal remained mute. His father adjured him in the name of the Gospel, but Vincent just walked out of the door, back to the miners of La Borinage and was not heard of again for months. How was he living? His struggle could hardly be an easy one. Possibly he was starving to death in his black hole. Theo could endure it no longer, for he had no one in Paris to talk to about the ideas that had bound him to his brother. For these ideas had kept their strength, they were only pushed out of sight. Of course the world was not as you used to see it. You had learnt more and knew something of the realities of life. But although your knowledge had increased, you were no happier than when you were by the mill of Rijswijk. In July he wrote to his brother as he used to write to him. 'Vincent, what is the matter?' He also enclosed some money. Vincent looked at it. The proper thing would be no doubt to return it, on the other hand it would be very pleasant to have a square meal once more. Moreover he would like to make Theo understand a thing or two, in so far as he was still capable of it. He would soon discover, and so he replied to his brother.

He remained in his hole, and a hole he supposed it was. Perhaps he must always stay in it, perhaps not. He was like a sick animal suffering from distemper. Perhaps it was incurable and he would die of it, or



A BRABANTIAN PEASANT

1885

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perhaps he would recover with renewed vigour. In any case the best thing to do was to go through such a process alone. His distemper was no doubt a very curious and weary illness, but at least he could say: 'I am a passionate creature, destined to do a number of more or less stupid things which later on I will have more or less to regret . . . but the thing is to derive advantage from my passion by all the means at my disposal. For instance, it is a necessity to me to be always learning something, and I am possessed by an insatiable desire for books. In other surroundings where there were pictures and works of art it was they which moved me in a similar way. I don't regret it, though I often feel homesick in this strange country for the land of pictures. You may remember that I used to know very well—and perhaps do still—what Rembrandt is, or Millet, or Jules Dupré, or Delacroix, or Millais, or Mathys Maris. Now I possess these surroundings no longer, but I possess something else, called soul. I am told that the soul never dies, is always searching and searching. . . . Instead of succumbing to my home-sickness, I have told myself that my home is everywhere, and instead of giving myself up to passive melancholy, I have chosen active despair, in so far as I have any opportunity for action. I have found a despair that hopes and strives. I have more or less seriously studied the books at my disposal, the Bible, Michelet's French Revolution, and last winter I read Shakespeare, a little Victor Hugo, Dickens and Harriet Beecher-Stowe, and then lately Æschylus, and other less classical people. . . . Medicine is another indispensable study. There is hardly a man who does not try to know something about it, or who does not at least want to know what it is about, and you see I know simply nothing. And all that occupies me and gives me something to think about. For perhaps five years, I don't know exactly, I have been straying about

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without an occupation, and you say, "For so long a time you have been sinking into the mire and have done nothing." But is that really true? True enough that sometimes I have earned my daily bread, and sometimes a friend gave it to me out of charity. I have lived as well and as badly as I could, and I suppose I have lost the confidence of a good many people. My finances are pathetic, and the future is not very rosy. Perhaps I could have done better. I have lost time in order to earn my living. I confess that my studies are wretched and desperate, and I lack incomparably more than I possess. But does this mean sinking and idling? I am simply out of a job because I have different ideas from the gentlemen who have got jobs to give away, and because I mean to stick to my ideas with every ounce of strength that is in me. . . . You may ask why I didn't stay at the University. I can only answer that I prefer to die a natural death than to prepare myself for it at a University, and I once learned a lesson, which seemed to me more valuable than a Greek unseen, from a man who was mowing grass. As to improving my position—have I ever asked for it? If you are suffering from tuberculosis or typhus, are you wrong if you maintain that you want something more potent than barley-water, or even that it is essential to you? I must go on as I have begun. If I don't, if I cease to search, to think, then I will be lost indeed. That's how I see it all. The main thing is just to go on. But you will ask what my real aim is? Well, my aim will assume a more definite shape just as a drawing becomes a sketch, and a sketch a picture. . . . You say that we used to agree about many problems, and the other day you reminded me of our walk to the old mill at Rijswijk, and you suppose me to have changed since then. I don't quite agree. All that has changed is this: my life used to be less difficult, and the future was not so dark, but my real, my inner self has not changed. If



DE AARDAPPELETTERS

1885

The Uncertain Quest

anything has changed at all, it is that I now think, love and believe much more profoundly than I used to. . . .'

Theo and his parents regarded Vincent's passion for books as the root of all his trouble. They thought he had deserted art because he ceased to be an art-dealer. Theo had made excellent progress in this direction, and therefore held pictures all important. Vincent, however, loved his pictures no less than before, but there were other things to be loved and they all belonged to each other. The attempt to discover this unity appeared to him to be the real problem, almost the real religion. 'There is something of Rembrandt in Shakespeare, Corregio in Michelet, and Delacroix in Victor Hugo. And there is also something of Rembrandt in the Gospel, or something of the Gospel in Rembrandt. . . . One must learn to read just as one must learn to see and to hear.' Everything depended on it. It may seem curious to have chosen such a hole to learn in, but perhaps learning was as easy there as anywhere else. Perhaps he had a tendency to become rather 'abstracted,' as Theo said, possibly also he deserved the reproach of being rather lazy about his dress, and the other details which were important in the outside world. Nevertheless it was quite possible that he did what was essential in his dark hole, while others who thought he did nothing only made mischief for all their importance. Perhaps he had chosen this spot because he discerned there through the mirk creatures whom he might approach. If he learned nothing else there, he could learn that he was incapable of helping his fellows, even those in that hole. 'Many a man has a bonfire in his heart and nobody comes to warm himself at it. The passers-by notice only a little smoke from the chimney, and go their way. . . . I am drawn more and more to the conclusion that to love much is the best means of approaching God. Love a friend, any one, or any thing you

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like, and I tell you, you will be on the right road to learn more. You must love with a high and intense determination, with your will and your intellect, and seek always to deepen, expand and improve your knowledge, for that way lies God. If a man loves Rembrandt profoundly, then in his heart of hearts he knows God. Another man may study the history of the French Revolution, and he will not be a sceptic, for he will feel the power that shapes our ends. If you have attended the free lectures of the College of Misery, for a short time even, and have paid attention to what you have seen with your own eyes and heard with your own ears, you will reap a firm faith and learn more than you can express in words. He that hath eyes to see, let him see. Afterwards you can be a little abstracted at times, and dream awhile. I know that some become too abstracted, too dreamy, and it may quite well happen to me one of these days. They say the dreamer falls sometimes into the well, but afterwards he climbs up again. . . .

‘There are wastrels and wastrels. There are wastrels who filch the golden hours because they are idle, cowardly and vicious. If you think right you may number me among these. But there are others, idle in spite of themselves, consumed by a passionate desire for action, who do nothing because they cannot do anything, because they have no tools to work with, and because they are hemmed in by circumstances. People like this do not even know what they could do, they only feel instinctively: I am good for something, I have a right to live, I know I could be different from my present self. What purpose could I serve, how be of use? There is something serviceable in me. What is it? These idlers are quite different, and if you think it right you may number me among these. A bird in a cage in spring-time knows well that there is some function he could perform, something he could do, yet he cannot do it.



NUDE
1886

The Uncertain Quest

What can it be? He cannot remember exactly. He says to himself that the other birds are building their nests and feeding their young. He beats out his brain against the wires of his cage, but the cage remains and the bird goes mad with anguish. Look at the wastrel, say all the birds that flutter past, look at him! The prisoner is kept alive. There is no external evidence of what goes on within him. He is well and more or less merry when the sun shines. Times change, and he gets fits of despair. The children who clean out his cage think that he has everything he needs, but the bird looks at the storm-laden sky and revolts against his fate. I am cooped up in a cage and lack nothing, you idiots! . . .'

Such were Vincent's thoughts, but perhaps there was another kind of idler in him whom he himself did not know. Was he not face to face with the everyday work of the world, while he stood there waiting for it? Of course he had been younger once, had been in other surroundings where he had strayed and wandered like an aimless tramp, simply because he could not find the right work, and because he lacked warmth. A single ray of sunshine would have sufficed. He wrote: 'Do you know what takes away the cage? Every profound relationship, brotherhood, friendship, love. They open the cage like a magic key. If you lose the key, existence becomes a living death. He who creates sympathy, creates Life! . . .'

The drama proceeds, and at last we hear the throb of a regular rhythm beating through the vast, slow-moving mass of incidents. The action is no longer a series of isolated events, but is a summons sounded at the gate of humanity. Every one of us who reads this letter is either in the shoes of the writer or the recipient, be he an artist or any one else. The *pièce de peintre* suddenly assumes the importance of a universal event.

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Art proves to be the highest incarnation of love—love of the world, love of mankind, love without any ulterior motive. Love, and you shall change your canvas into a flowering garden; love, and you shall call stones to Life; love, and your words shall resound to the end of Time.

Even at this period Vincent failed to fathom the ultimate possibilities of his consciousness. He saw nothing but his primary social functions, which served only to burst the walls which imprisoned his creative spirit. Neither talent, nor delight in beauty, nor ambition, but his need for love fanned to white heat, drove him into the world of creative art. And now we are faced by an artist innocent of art, untouched by all the negative or positive forces of individuality, an artist in all his nakedness. No man had hitherto beheld such a spectacle. Hunted and pursued, with all its blemishes upon it, his undying soul made this claim: 'No matter what the creature in whom I have my being does, I and I alone am its master, my kingdom is not of this world, my kingdom is the kingdom of love. Does it exist? I will seek it.'

Van Gogh's pictures do not constitute his distinction, the creations of other painters have been greater and more profound, but it lies in the manifest mystery of his vision, perceived by Vincent as through translucent crystal. As often as this mystery assumed plastic form, new joy was added to the world exceeding all the pleasures of æsthetic appreciation, and the desires of collectors seem by comparison as mean as a bout of drunkenness. Art can only be achieved by an evolution such as Vincent's struggle from the depths of La Borinage. Art that dare claim to rival the past—Vincent never dared—can be produced in this century only through suffering, constant watching, relentless effort, perennial doubt and despair that yet preserves its essential force. An artist of to-day can make good his endeavour to find in chaos rhythmic order and

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stand his trial before God, as of old before his Guild, only if he pass through this ordeal. Then will his moral force gain an essential power which the children of happier centuries did not need.

Theo was by no means bourgeois; he had all the instincts of the hermit. After Vincent's last letter, Theo's doubts of his brother had vanished. A few months later our straying tramp found the only road that was left open to him. Art had been the primary cause of his starvation, and art alone could satisfy it. He was no longer allowed to preach, and as all possibility of a higher communion with his fellows was precluded for Vincent except through sermons, he drew near to his neighbour by the self-expression of a draughtsman. He stored up with pen and pencil every form and outline which seemed to express his miners and his miners' lives. From this moment a feverish activity seized him, never again to depart from him. He was twenty-seven and there still lay ten years in front of him. Two-thirds of this period Vincent devoted to a minutely detailed and Spartan training. The tests of patience imposed by the old Guilds were child's play in comparison. A large portion of the last third of his remaining span was filched from him by sickness, but the years that were left sufficed to create the work of a very fruitful life.

Vincent laid down ten commandments for himself as a guide through his own School of Art: Only do what you like, do it thoroughly, fanatically; examine yourself closely, for you are a racehorse, spare neither whip nor spur to get all you can out of your horse; choose your medium cautiously; choose your first milestone cautiously, then your second one, then your third always with care, then choose as recklessly as you can, and if you reach it you will never have passed the first.

He began humbly, with a very modest drawing. He copied all the

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painters whom he loved. First of all Millet, of course, and his 'Travaux des Champs,' and especially the 'Sower.' This Sower became in Vincent's work what self-portraits are in the creations of other artists. Then after Millet he tackled all the other artists who painted scenes of toil. Theo had to send him every reproduction he could lay hands on. Perhaps—it was not altogether impossible—he could earn his living as a draughtsman, as an illustrator for the papers, like the people who drew for *Punch*. Vincent never dreamed of painting, which was of course for others. But even for drawing, experienced artists were necessary as teachers. How delightful it must be to be together with artists! A world of painters seemed like a fairyland to an inhabitant of La Borinage. One day he started out on foot for Courrières to make the acquaintance of Jules Breton. He tramped all day and slept under the open sky by night. The peasants gave him bread in exchange for drawings. The French air seemed curiously clear and pure compared with the sky that stretched over La Borinage. . . . When he got to Courrières, he found the imposing studio of Breton so unlike his mental picture of it that he dared not ring the bell. So he turned on his heel and went back to the bleakness whence he came.



FLOWERPOT

1886

Chapter II
Storm and Stress



IN A RESTAURANT

1886

Chapter II

Storm and Stress

VINCENT longed for intercourse with people in similar circumstances to himself—he believed there were such—and this longing drove him to Brussels in the autumn of 1880. Theo financed the adventure at first with the aid of his parents, but from then on he supported his brother entirely with what he saved out of his salary. Theo made these sacrifices not only for the sake of his brother, but for the sake of an ideal, which was perhaps not very definite, but his spiritual happiness was in some way bound up in it. Vincent served this ideal and Theo wished to do the same. And thus the union between the two brothers was re-established. Vincent looked about in Brussels and found the town preferable to La Borinage in more than one respect. He found there were all kinds of opportunities to learn drawing. There was the Academy, where there were studios and models, and everything else a man needed and could not get, especially if he were a pauper. The Academy was one of the best and most famous in Europe, but this very distinction made it rather alarming to a beginner. Perhaps there might lurk, behind all this outward perfection, the same strange powers who had forbidden him to teach or to preach, authorities like those moving the educational and the missionary worlds, who had tricked him out of study and religion. An insignificant draughtsman, somewhere in a garret, taught him the laws of perspective. The rest he did for himself. He copied the printed ‘Cours de Dessin’ by Bague, which had been sent to him in La Borinage, and which accompanied him from that time onwards throughout life. He plunged into the science of anatomy, and devoured the laws of light and

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shade. He learned it all from the books he borrowed from his friend in the garret. He drew the types which passed in the wintry streets and idle workmen, whom he induced to sit to him for a few sous; he drew the landscape outside the gates of Brussels, and he copied Millet again and again. Occasionally Vincent sent a few drawings to his father just to show that he was no longer in La Borinage. Theo was in the seventh heaven, for he felt already that Vincent would succeed somehow and that he would never join the ranks of mediocrity. Vincent, however, did not indulge in illusions; he could not despise mediocre artists, provided they were sincere, for he hoped for little more than to attain to their measure of accomplishment.

His modesty was well founded. His talent seemed extraordinarily small. Scores of mediocrities started with greater gifts. He drew like a boy of twelve, not a line was straight, and in his drawings one can almost see his awkward fingers tracing the lines across the paper. Little did he guess that his gawky scrawls already contained the seeds of a painter's style, and he strove in vain to uproot them. He longed more than anything to depict a real workman, his expression, his clothes; everything must be absolutely accurate, and so he would go and buy an outfit. That was not easy, because such clothes cost money, and in order to save it he lived on potatoes, bread and chestnuts. If only he had done a few thousand drawings he would be a little further on his way. He had all the necessary patience, but patience alone was not enough. If he was to become an artist, something outside himself must enter into his work. What it was he could not imagine. Anyhow it had nothing to do with anatomy, but it was of the utmost importance in life generally. Perhaps there was more in men than art could satisfy. Perhaps a little happiness might provide the clue.



TO THE FACTORY

1886

Storm and Stress

After a hard winter he left Brussels in the spring of 1881, and went to his parents in Etten. There he met a cousin of his from Amsterdam, a widow with a small child. She was a little older than Vincent and was the daughter of a pastor. And before long he realized what he had lacked in Brussels. 'Il faut, qu'une femme souffle sur toi pour que tu sois homme.' It need not even have been a woman. Vincent's sensuousness had of necessity become a matter of the intellect. A man with powerful sympathies, who could overlook what was superficial in him, would have supplied his desire for harmonious companionship. So far he had never found that companionship. Theo was only beginning to understand him. Their correspondence with each other gave both brothers many of the joys of friendship, but it really evaded all the difficulties of Vincent's personality, because Van Gogh, the letter writer, naturally concealed all the crudities of Van Gogh the man. Letters also lacked the immediate warmth of personal contact for which Vincent longed. His relationship with his parents remained unsatisfactory. How could they regard him otherwise than as the failure, the dark blot upon the family? His art, this slender effort, was a mere caprice. How long would his new pastime last? Vincent regarded his parents as relations from a different quarter of the globe. He did not share one of their well-worn theories, and his father's calling which, not long ago, had been holy to him, was now little better than a tissue of lies. He did not cease to regard the rectory as his home, and was grateful for all that had been done for him there, but it was ever more important to make a home for himself. He was nearly thirty, and that was just the right age to marry. He could conceive no reason against it. His cousin had arrived in the nick of time. This lady clung to the memory of her late husband, and sent Vincent about his business in a way that really precluded all possibility of hope.

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Nothing could be further from his mind than discouragement. The lady lived, therefore he would win her some day. It was just like art, he was not accustomed to attain his goal at the first attempt. To succeed meant sacrifice, hard work and patience. One day she would, she must see what she could be to him and he to her. She and her child—a charming child—were alone because her parents, Amsterdam clergy, were just like his own. He was alone. What could be simpler than to join their lot? He must be patient. His hopes had been shattered once before in London, owing to a misunderstanding that could only happen to a stray Dutchman in England. Perhaps it was his fault, because instead of fighting with all his might, he had given up the pursuit too easily. He had been too proud. But now he knew what love was, he knew what was at stake. Did she know it? She clung to the past. Was that right? Can love, the most vital force, cling to the dead? Was it not unhealthy, and ought he not to cure her?

She had absolutely no inclination towards him, and his father cast doubts on his means of existence. Surely he could not mean that seriously! Did he not exist? His existence was peculiarly in evidence, more so at present than ever before. His father would just have to put up with his ability to exist until the contrary had been proved. And as to his cousin's assertions, they were nullified by his assertions to the contrary, because she simply did not know what she was talking about. She probably dreamed of heaven knows what grandeur, ecstasy and the like, not knowing that these things mattered nothing beside that sense of the future which went hand in hand with true love. Patience! He would be patient.

Hope increased his confidence in his work. He drew twice as fast and his efforts became more alluring. He sketched everything, the plain

Storm and Stress

near Etten, the cottages in the village, the smithy, the carpenter's shop, the clog-makers. He drew with simple lines, used a carpenter's pencil, which had the merit of being related to what he tried to depict, and his sketches did not altogether lack a certain rhythm. The economy of means employed created this simple rhythm. Vincent despatched his drawings to his brother in Paris. Perhaps Theo could sell one or two of them for a few francs, with which he could buy a ticket to Amsterdam, for his contrary cousin had gone back there. Theo warned him against exaggerated hopes. Material considerations could not be entirely dismissed, and in certain circumstances more might be achieved by reticence and patience. Vincent was in love and he despised such bourgeois advice. How could passive resistance demonstrate his will-power to the fair widow? Diplomacy availed nothing in either art or love. Emotion was everything, and he wanted to love without diplomacy, he wanted to love for love's sake, because he loved reality. Nothing was so real as strong affection. Every phase of Nature was proof of it. Nature's law was: 'Who loves, lives; who loves, works; who works, has bread.' Besides, all good poets and philosophers recommended love.

Vincent's parents were in despair about the aggressive attitude of their son, whose behaviour threatened to endanger their intercourse with their relations in Amsterdam. Vincent laughed and as soon as he had enough money went to Amsterdam. He was forbidden to see his cousin by her father, so he launched an attack against him. His worthy uncle lost the serene expression of a pastor. He told Vincent that his daughter would not dream of having anything to do with him. Vincent absolutely disgusted her—yes, disgusted her.

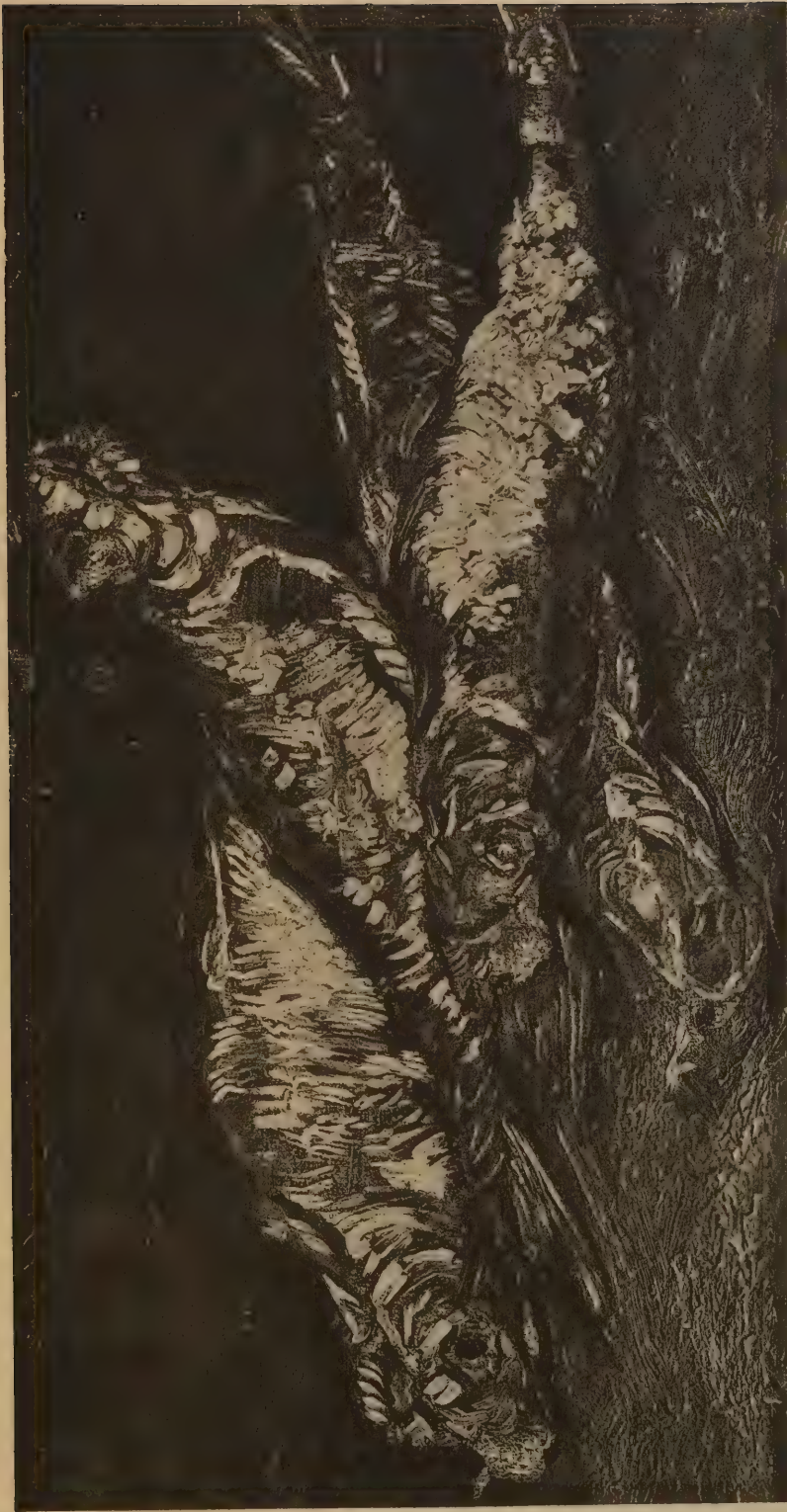
Vincent stretched out his hand and held it in the flame of a burning light. 'Let me see her only for as long as I hold my hand in this flame,'

Vincent van Gogh

he begged. The uncle blew out the lamp and showed Vincent the door. . . .

This was the second crisis of the same kind, but much more brutal than the first. He suffered terribly, but it happened too late to break him. The artist in him had already been roused, and he caught up his anguish with creative hands. He used his pain to strengthen his personality. The consequences were far-reaching, for this was the last commonplace experience the pastor's son was to undergo. He had done with the dead God of pastors and with the well-dressed maxims of his bourgeois parents. He had nothing more in common with his father, who refused to read Michelet and who regarded Zola as a Godless wretch.

It was suggested that Vincent should leave his father's house. People like his father were respectable lunatics, with good intentions and only partial powers of perception. They did not know the Spirit in whose name they acted. They were blinded by mere words and phrases, and they were bourgeois. One could live decently in a very different way, 'in a gentler spirit.' Corot and Millet lived like that. They possessed the 'rayon blanc.' Everything else was relatively sombre, even the best sermon. Vincent's personality developed. He was accused of atheism because he ceased to go to church and because he had loved a pastor's daughter too violently. This evolution was not a product of Vincent's intellect, but of his emotions. He had attained his maturity, and it showed itself not only in the works of the artist, but in every practical detail of his life. It vitalized his whole existence, and gave profundity to the drama. At that time Mauve gave him a box of colours. Vincent visited him occasionally at The Hague. At first the famous painter was very kind to him, gave him good advice, and taught him some of the elementary laws of painting. Vincent overwhelmed him with gratitude.



HERRINGS-STILL LIFE

1886

Storm and Stress

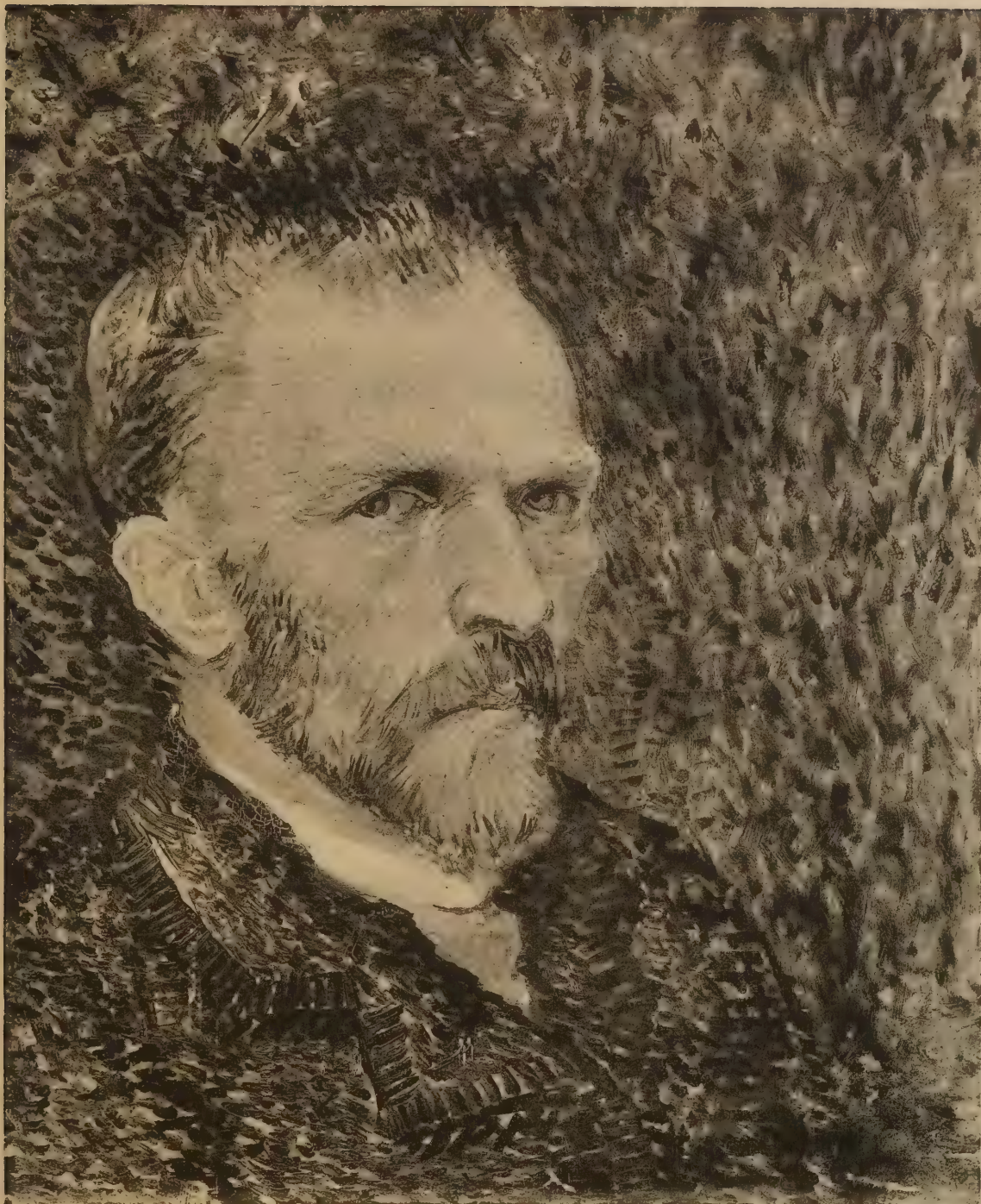
At last he had found his master. He painted his first studies in oils under Mauve's supervision. He painted still-lives of wooden clogs, potatoes and so forth, but he regarded painting as a kind of personal indulgence, and remained faithful on the whole to his drawing, which had improved considerably. Nothing in particular kept him at home, so he moved to The Hague towards the end of 1881 to be near Mauve, and he actually dared to furnish a studio. Mauve helped him, and Theo, who had been promoted in the meantime, now offered him a regular income of a hundred francs a month.

Vincent's means of livelihood depended entirely on Theo's earnings, but he was never happy about his brother's career. He considered Theo's inner development far more important than his own income, and the assistant in the Paris Gallery was developing, in his own way, as steadily as the pupil in The Hague. Theo learned to differentiate between permanent and ephemeral values; he rapidly acquired an unusual degree of connoisseurship, and he gradually became an influence in the Goupil Galleries. He used both his influence and his knowledge in the interest of art. Theo's superiors of course measured the value of his ideas by the turnover they produced. The intercourse with Vincent helped him to stick to his guns without losing courage when his employers disagreed with him. In a corner of the Gallery he showed his customers the developments of modern art. Theo was an admirable art-dealer, but Vincent considered this profession too superficial, too cheap. In fact, it was not a profession at all. Every man who was hale and hearty ought to have some craft. Every letter, every word from Theo breathed living art. Why did he not exchange his frock-coat for a painter's overalls? Vincent's advice was no manner of speech. Theo loved art—no one could love it more—and he had vision and sensibility.

Vincent van Gogh

Why not, then? Art was not to be trifled with. Modesty might present an obstacle, but then in painting there was a significance for every impulse, even for modesty. The obstacle might even be idleness, or a kind of cowardice. Theo was the more cool-headed of the two brothers, and he had to struggle to stand up against Vincent's hot impulse. Theo felt his seemingly false position, but in the Goupil Gallery his dearest ambitions, like his modern pictures, were relegated to a corner. His faith in Vincent became a silent cult, which nourished that part of Theo which would not compromise, and as he was always conscious of the obstacles which Vincent ignored, the part of Sancho Panza in this play fell to his lot, and was played with a tragedy no less profound. Vincent never really understood his brother, for he regarded him simply as his nearest friend and blood-relation, and also as the only tangible force in another world. Their common blood and the similarity of their outlook smoothed away superficial differences, but in reality it rendered all compromise infinitely more difficult. In order to influence Theo, Vincent renounced his influence over every one else. If he could win Theo over to his side, it would perhaps be possible after all to found a community. Theo was aware of Vincent's views and aims, and the responsibility this knowledge imposed on him only added to his burden. The fact that their intercourse was confined to letters helped to avoid many obstacles. Vincent would soon have exhausted the nervous reserve of his weaker brother if they had been constantly together. Theo was sufficiently circumspect to realize this danger.

Correspondence would have been better than actual contact even with Mauve. Their acquaintance had reached its zenith when Mauve had given him lessons in water-colour drawing. Could there ever have been a greater benefactor? Vincent's cup of gratitude overflowed; he



PORTRAIT OF THE PAINTER

1886/87

Storm and Stress

wanted to stay permanently with Mauve, and never guessed that he had become a nuisance to his master long ago. The famous painter was annoyed by some preposterous piece of arrogance on the part of the pupil. This fellow in workman's clothes, with whom you could hardly be seen about, was really unfathomable. He seemed as modest as a worm, he listened devoutly to everything he was told, seemed grateful and industrious as he ought to be, and then suddenly: 'No, Mauve, that's not the way—just the opposite!' There was something absolutely incalculable, like a geometric progression, in this attitude. At last, to give him a real nut to crack, Mauve made him draw plaster casts. Vincent did not like plaster casts, he thought plaster execrable. He smashed the casts to pieces and threw them into the coal-cellar. He would not contemplate drawing them until they were white again. It was Van Gogh's exaggeration that was so galling. He exaggerated here just as he had exaggerated as a missionary. He mistook ideas for facts, and assumed that the motives of other people were as simple as his own. 'You are vicious,' said Mauve, and with that he washed his hands of him.

In a communal kitchen, at dinner, he met a woman who pleased him. She was rather faded, and she had a baby. There was a peculiar charm about these faded creatures. Her hands were not exactly the hands of a lady, like his cousin's, they were more like the hands of a working woman. 'There was something of Chardin or even Jan Steen in her curious appearance.' But she was not a working woman, at least not in the generally accepted sense. She belonged to that class which is abhorred by all pastors. She was a prostitute. This woman was very good to him, quite remarkably good. And she was not even expensive. 'Listen,' he said to her, 'You and I don't need to make ourselves drunk to feel emotion for each other. You'd better pocket what I can spare.'

Vincent van Gogh

Of course, every one must feel surprise at Vincent's behaviour in view of his great passion for his cousin, but working with hands and brain did not constitute the whole of life. He could not throttle his energy for his cousin's sake. She was something new in his life, and it might all have turned out very happily, but she insisted on belonging to the opposite camp, to the world of pastors, to a prison from which she would not permit him to rescue her. The love he felt for this prostitute was something much older. He had always felt an affection for these fallen creatures, and he used to envy the men whom he saw in the streets walking about with them. They were like sisters to him. From this time on he visited prostitutes occasionally in their brothels. There was nothing very remarkable about his procedure, only it was done with a frankness which made it appear even more vicious.

He worked furiously. Poor people sat to him. Painting became much too expensive. A hundred francs a month did not go far. Models cost one and a half gulden a day. Theo could not always send money at the right time, and then he starved, which was not so very dreadful. But when he could not work because he lacked this cursed money, it became unbearable. He lived by his work, not literally, of course—he once sold M. Teersteg of the Goupil Galleries a dozen drawings for thirty gulden—but in the real sense he lived entirely by his work. Every drawing he made gave him a stronger hold on reality. He tortured himself a good deal, was slow and awkward and sentimental into the bargain. There was something heavy, both in his mind and in his hand, which kept him working hours at a few lines. Every new drawing made work a little easier, and sometimes his drawings reflected the weight of this heaviness. He noticed himself that he was slowly penetrating through the surface to the reality of appearance. At first he only saw



LE PONT D'AUSTERLITZ

1887

Storm and Stress

what was superficial and banal, but gradually he plumbed the depths and made motion out of moving objects, and the limbs he drew began to function. Poor people and especially workmen, who were quite simple, were the best models. The whole of their life was written in the range of their three or four expressions. Other painters had an easier time of it, because they could pay for expensive models, pretty women for instance. They meant nothing to Vincent. Necessity forced him to concentrate on one type, to deepen his experience in one and the same direction and to forego all superficial variety. The necessity stood Vincent in the stead of the advantages of more primitive times and of the clearly defined training of the Guilds. An old withered woman sitting before him suggested enough of Nature to rouse all the possibilities of plastic form. Simplicity contains a wealth of motives to creative action. The limitations of necessity made him free. He loved the necessity which exercised his faculties, and brought before his vision what he loved to see. He could have done nothing in other surroundings. Prostitutes were his sisters, and working men his brothers. Like them he was an outcast—an outcast who knew the peace of that despair which has long since given up useless strife. In the day he worked and at night he wrote letters to Theo. If only Theo would take up painting! He was more pliable, more lyrical, and less attracted to plastic, human forms. He was sure Theo could be a landscape-painter. No doubt art-dealing brought its own experiences. There were good moments in every walk of life, but they were nothing compared to the joy an artist experienced when he felt that secret power grow within him, as a mother felt her child grow beneath her heart. If Theo could only feel that for a single instant, he would not hesitate to send Goupil to the devil, and then they would be together.

Vincent van Gogh

His terrible longing had not left him, and in 1882 it spurred him to his most daring exaggeration. In January he met another such woman. She was not very beautiful, she was pregnant, not very young, she tippled, was peculiarly foul-mouthed; she had in fact sunk very low, but there was something marvellous about her. Life had ridden roughshod over her, and made a discordant harp of her body, of which her evil tongue knew nothing. Vincent painted the discord. It is the naked woman in profile, with her arms above her head, and Vincent also made a lithograph of it and called it 'Sorrow.' She is seated in a sad, imaginary landscape, beneath which he wrote Michelet's sentence: 'Comment se fait-il qu'il-y-ait sur la terre une femme seule délaissée?' And the whole picture is miserably bad, mere sentimental illustration, formless and lifeless. Vincent's compassion had gained the upper hand, he had forgotten the profundity of nature, he lost his sensibility in superficiality. The same thing happened to him in life. This pregnant woman had already another child, and a mother as wretched as herself. The poor creature was ill, and had to undergo an operation to be delivered safely of her child. Vincent intervened, made debts to pay her debts, took the poor creature to Leyden to a good doctor for her operation, nursed her back to health. The woman from the gutter was to be his wife. She lacked the refined speech of his cousin, she was a trifle rough and a trifle wicked. The gutter had left its traces upon her. How could she be good, if she had never felt any goodness? And because he was good to her, she was good to him and came to him like a tame dove. Her roughness matched his roughness. His darker side held no terrors for her. He had no rosy illusions, he saw the life of a working man before him. She had learnt how to sit for him in spite of her feeble condition. Everything went splendidly, she helped him with every

Storm and Stress

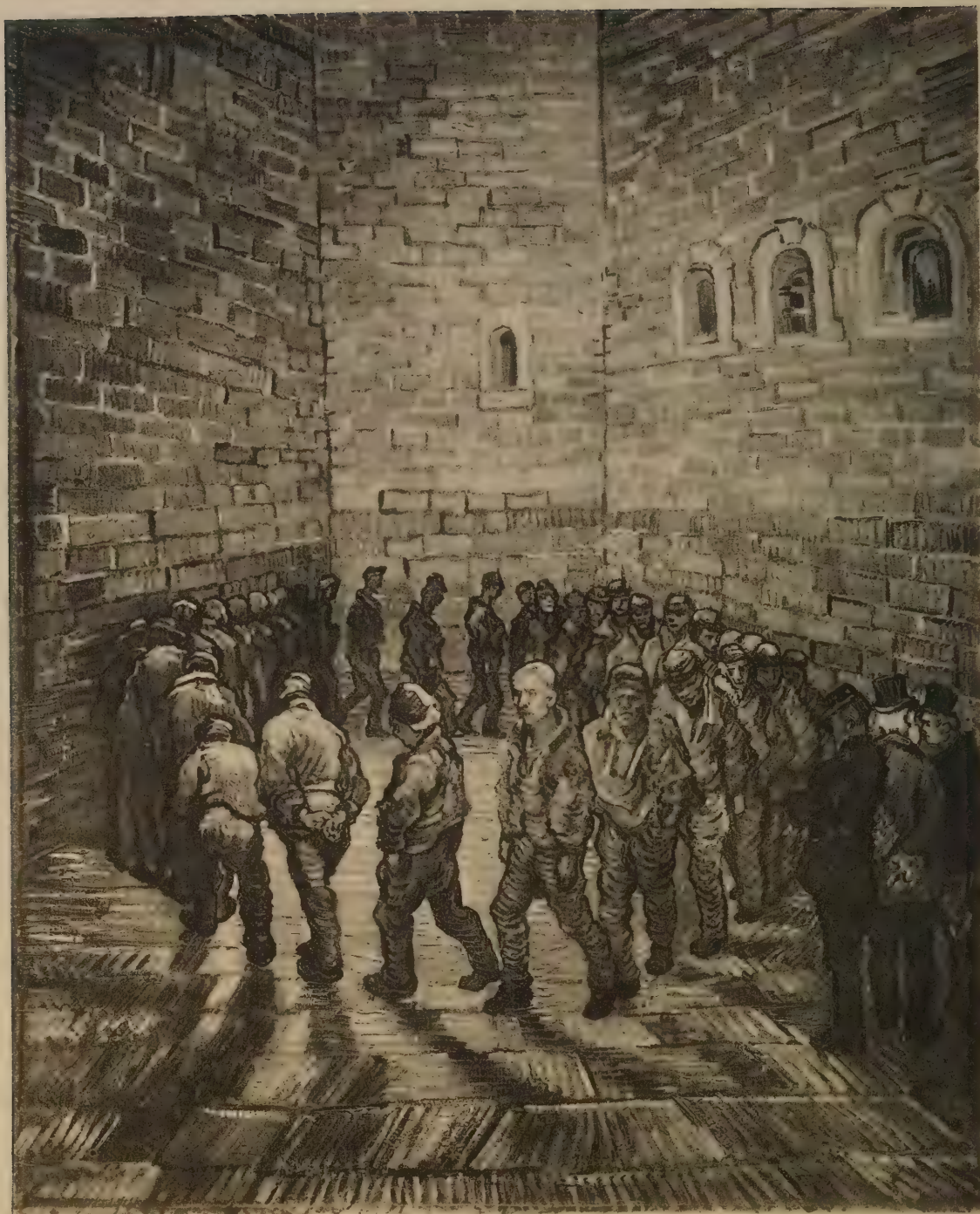
drawing. All those drawings of her body pregnant with new life were made together. It was bliss merely to be able to say 'we.' No one was to imagine that he could call such women bad women. A woman from a rectory would of course be different—but better? Who had the right to call himself better? In a well-organized and pure society such women might be despicable, but in modern society they were like Sisters of Mercy. He would most decidedly not take Sien to see his parents, or any other members of the class to which he had once belonged. He had left this class long ago, and had become a working man. He wanted nothing better—to be a working man and to be left in peace. These exaggerations brought all kinds of consequences in their wake. In a town where people were dressed in certain ways and where they judged according to appearances, no man could live for nothing. The few people who had looked him up occasionally, stayed away and thought he was not quite right in the head. He was faced by a storm against which he had no protection but his thoughts. It all depended on Theo. He had written and told him all about Sien. If Theo deserted him, everything was lost. If it must be so, it would be so. He acted as he thought, and he had to think thus. He must have a home at last, otherwise he could not work or find life worth while. Painting was not to be allowed to become the fiction of a philosophic hermit. Art and solitude were for him irreconcilable contradictions.

The days that followed were anxious. Theo's reply did not arrive. If he deserted him it would be a great tragedy, quite apart from the problem of money. But even these days passed. Theo would never desert him for such a reason. Theo would much rather cut himself off from Holland, or from the whole world, if necessary, and stand by him. Vincent's relations with this woman could only heighten Theo's respect for

Vincent van Gogh

him, although they might add to the cup of his disappointments. In fact this was more than probable, but no man had a right to say anything against his action. Since Vincent willed it, it must be so.

The situation was not pleasant. In June Vincent fell ill. Sien had infected him with the traces of the gutter. He had to go into hospital for several weeks. In the wards set apart for the very poor, the doctors hardly pampered their patients, but it was interesting as a third class waiting-room. If only he could draw these beautiful models! He had Dickens and his books about perspective with him.—Vincent's father visited him in the hospital, but there was little opportunity for conversation. 'It was all a dream, just like the whole business of lying about idle in bed.' Apparently Vincent passed through a serious nerve crisis at that time. Sien had to go to Leyden to a maternity hospital, where she was delivered of a child. His birth involved another serious operation, which confined her to the hospital for several weeks. Vincent used the interval to prepare their new home, a garret in a suburb of The Hague. He divided the garret by a wooden partition, and made a most comfortable studio. The studio had—as a studio ought to have—a cradle and rocking-chair, and there was another room next door as well as a charming and picturesque kitchen. In these surroundings this workman's family was to start its new existence. Theo raised Vincent's allowance to one hundred and fifty francs a month, which was not a great deal for four people, but to have his own hearth and the care of others was as good as a fortune to Vincent. The real wedding was to be postponed until Vincent had earned at least one hundred and fifty francs himself. He went to fetch Sien and the baby in triumph. She had made herself very popular in the hospital, most of the doctors said good-bye to her, and even the head matron. She was a little mother, a tame dove, and the



THE PRISON COURTYARD

1887

Storm and Stress

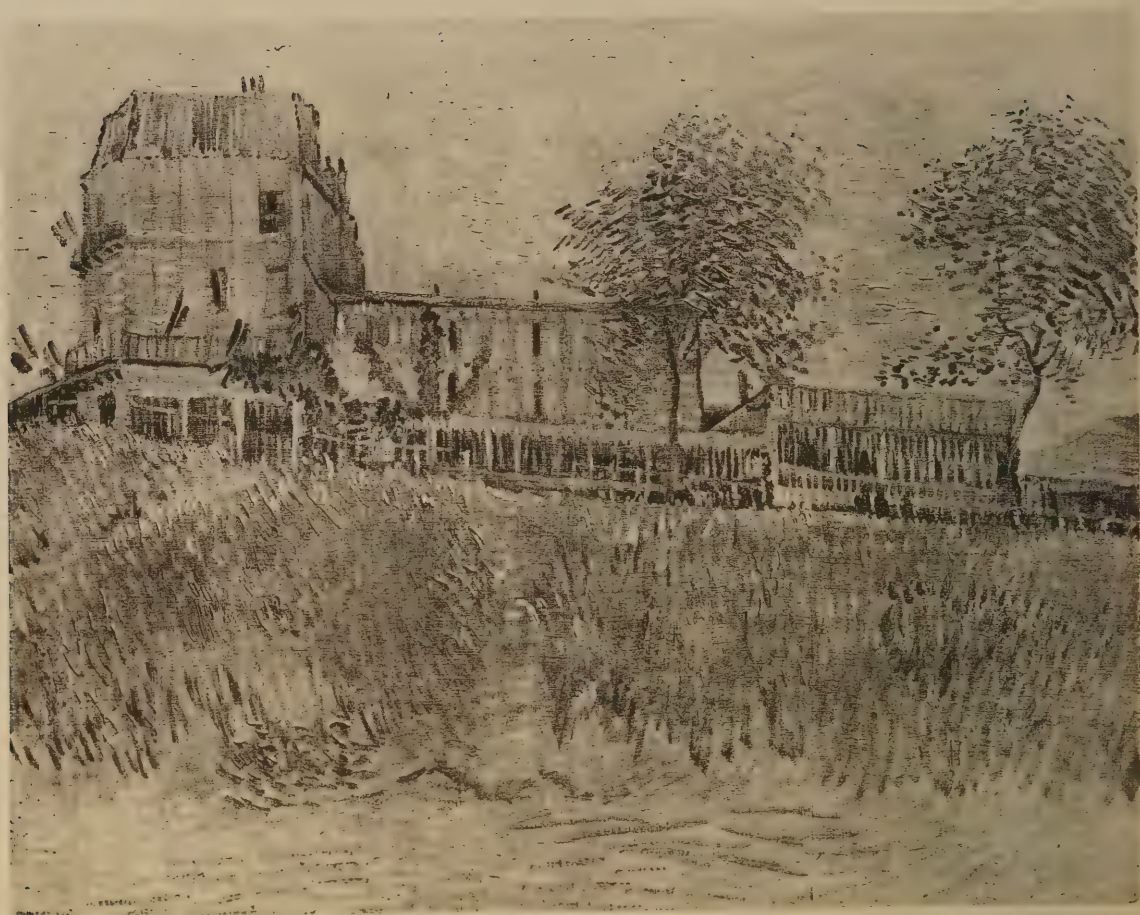
cradle and baby's clothes delighted them both beyond words. Vincent found a large corner in his heart for this child of another father. It was too small to disappoint him, and he washed the baby when his mother forgot him, and delighted in every sign of his growing life.

In this period, especially the second half of 1882, his own impulses for the first time drove him to paint. It was the first time he had recognized the limitations of drawing as opposed to painting in colour. Earlier, in the Mauve period, painting in oils had been an exercise done at the bidding of his master and nothing more. But in 1882 nature occasionally forced the brush into his hand. He was at the time under the influence of his beloved de Groux, which speaks volumes about the quality of his pictures. Sentiment predominated, although unintentionally. By instinct he strove after solid painting. He explained to Theo how he set about painting an autumn sunset in the Bosch. 'The main thing is to get the depth of colour, the enormous force and solidity of the ground, and I did not realize until I came to paint how much light there is even in the dark parts. Then I had to catch the light and yet convey the depth of solid, fat glowing colour. You can't imagine a carpet anything like as magnificent as the deep red-brown that glows through the trees in front of a sunset in autumn. Young beech trees grow in the soil, and one side of them sucks the light and reflects a green radiance, while the other side casts warm black-green shadows. Behind their slender trunks and the brown-red soil, the sky is a very tender, warm, blue-grey—almost without any blue, and quite glittering. And somewhere else against the sky stands a dusky edge of green and a network of trunks with yellow leaves. The figures of wood-gatherers are dotted about, making dark masses of mysterious shadow. Suddenly you see the white cap of a woman, bent to the ground, against this amazing red-

Vincent van Gogh

brown colour. Her skirts catch the light and cast a deep shadow. Near the edge of the wood is the dark silhouette of some other creature, and perhaps the white cap and shoulders of another woman outlined against the sky. These large poetic figures seem in the darkening shadows like huge terra-cotta statues. . . . I had to paint quickly, as the light was changing, and so put in these figures with a few bold strokes of a thick brush. I was surprised to see how solid the slim trunks were in the background. I began them with the brush, but as the ground was already covered with heavy colour, the strokes simply disappeared, so I squeezed the trees and the roots straight out of the tubes and then modelled them a little with my brush. Now my little trees stand quite solidly in the earth and their roots support them. In a certain sense I am rather glad that I never learned how to paint. If I had done I would probably have missed effects like the one I have just described, and now I feel that they are just what I want. If I can't get them—well then, I can't. But I am going to try, even if I don't know how to set about it.' He had no idea how he started his sketch. He simply had a clean panel in his hand and it got filled up. But he was far from satisfied. 'In mijn snelschrift mogen woorden zijn die niet te ontcijferen zijn-fouten of leemtes—toch is er iets over van't geen het bosch of strand of figuur zeiden, en is het niet een tamme of conventioneelle taal die niet uit de natuur zelf voortkwam. . . .'

This was already the speech of a painter. People who can stretch out for their tubes like that to make their trees solid are on the way to becoming painters. However he had a long way to go yet. Probably many sketches were started as spontaneously as the one he described, and then finished off at home with the aid of his memory. Frequently he forsook his painting for weeks and months together and began to draw again,



SURESNES

1867

Storm and Stress

because for Vincent drawing was like sowing and painting like reaping. The process of self-education was marked by a severity that is generally associated only with more primitive times. He went about his work like a peasant who makes up his mind to add to the few acres he already possesses only when, after careful consideration, he decides that he can cultivate the new land as intensively as the old.

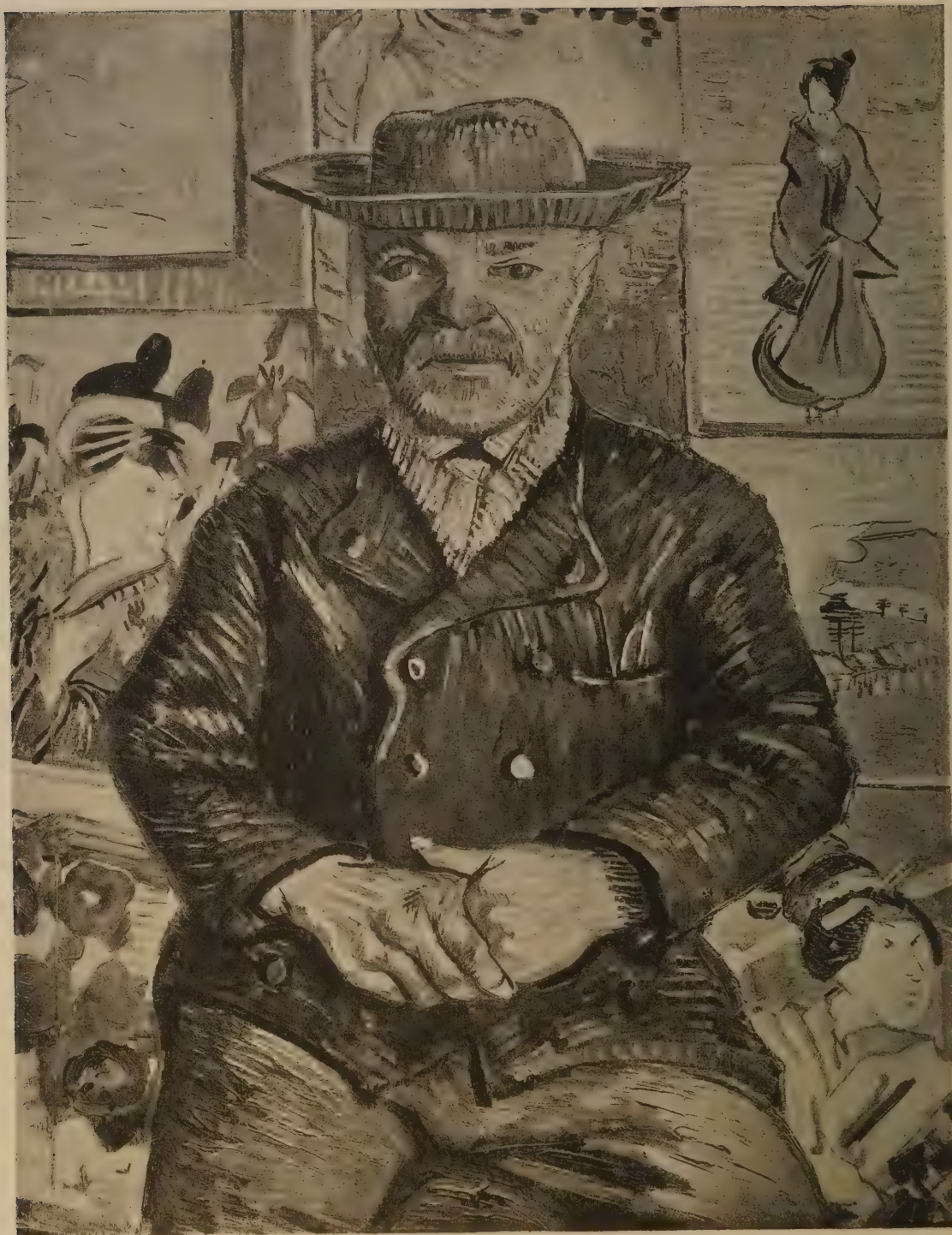
Theo entertained high hopes of Vincent's new departure. He became almost impatient of his stubborn persistence in drawing, although he realized how much Vincent gained by it. Theo knew that there was a painter in his brother from the moment when he saw his first attempt. At times he had gently suggested to him that he should use a brush, but in vain. It almost seemed as if Vincent regarded colour as a will-o'-the-wisp. But now he had adopted colour of his own accord, and if he once took to anything, he stuck to it. The ménage with Sien appeared to work quite well, although Vincent never wrote about it. Theo had an idea of founding such a ménage himself. The gutters of Paris—was it chance or one of the invisible reflexes that played between the two brothers?—had presented him with a similar experience. He too had met a woman, who had suffered at the rude hand of fate, though not as cruelly as poor Sien, and her sufferings had been more ordinary. She was none the less deserted, helpless and ill. Vincent was quite right. Such experiences made you feel as though, amidst the turmoil of life, you met the gaze of an *Ecce Homo*, which cast a spell compelling you to act in a way wholly contrary to your reason. Theo decided to take this woman to himself, and he did it to pay one-hundredth part of the debt the world owed to the poor creature. She was faced by a terrible operation if she was to recover. All kinds of complicated details connected with her misery had to be settled. She needed peace. Theo saw to everything, took her into

Vincent van Gogh

hospital, and found a suitable doctor who performed the dangerous operation successfully. He told Vincent daily how she was progressing, although Vincent knew no details, not even her name. Theo was shy and reticent, and unfolded the whole story to his brother only gradually. Vincent's sympathy was so strong that Theo could have imagined his brother was with him the whole time. This was just what Theo needed, for there was no such sympathy in the world of business, and the relation of the two brothers became extraordinarily close. There were differences between the two women. Theo's patient was an intellectual woman who understood art and poetry—things that did not enter Sien's horizon at all—in fact it seemed as if art and literature were the very remedies that she needed. Vincent chose suitable passages from Michellet and Thomas à Kempis for her. He also saw to it that she got some landscape drawings, for what an invalid lacked, especially in Paris, was nature. Theo must be persuaded to join his lot to hers as soon as she was well, and to forget all his doubts as to whether pity was a sufficient substitute for love. All that was essential was a powerful emotion; the name by which it was called mattered nothing.

According to Theo, however, the feelings of the other person had to be considered as well as his own, otherwise you might, with the best intentions in the world, only add to the woman's burdens. She might perhaps make sacrifices which would help no one, from gratitude, and at any rate Theo meant to weigh these considerations carefully.

Vincent longed to take the next train to Paris and discuss these problems, but he could not afford the railway fare. Perhaps Theo was worried about money too. After all he must make his own decision in a matter so important, but Vincent had always felt that it would be best for Theo to marry an intellectual woman. And Vincent personally



PORTRAIT OF PÈRE TANGUY

1887

Storm and Stress

would have regarded such a union as a miracle of mercy. And then, how could a woman fail to be happy with Theo? If only Theo's hesitation did not imply any consideration of the money which his brother consumed in Holland!

Since the fact that there was no market for his drawings worried his brother, Vincent thought of attempting to do popular work. He had really never intended to do anything else. Studies of the People for the People. He thought of drawing a series he would call 'Heads of the People.' He contemplated making lithographs which could be sold for ten Dutch cents a piece, if the cursed dealers could be excluded; he actually did make a number of drawings on stone at that time. If only he could find some permanent means of escape from financial worries! When Theo could not send him money at the right time, he sat there and starved, and not only he, but also Sien and the children; the newborn mite, who always squatted down near Vincent as soon as he could crawl. Vincent lacked nourishment. He was economical in the use of his lines, but they remained bare lines. And if he lacked the strength to draw, where was he to find the energy to paint? There was not enough food and not enough happiness in his home. Sometimes he felt faint, and his relationship with Sien developed as was inevitable. No one but an idiot would have failed to realize it from the start. Perhaps Vincent had realized it, but had fallen into the trap none the less. The situation was not a bad one, it was simply impossible. He was here and she was somewhere else. He had believed that he could make a companion of her and could be as primitive as she was. But Sien saw in Vincent a queer stranger who belonged to another world and acted as he did from some mad freak of vanity. If a friend of Vincent's appeared she went away and hid herself. Her mother began to intrigue. Perhaps Sien

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was better off in a brothel than in a painter's garret, where you could not even talk freely. She thought nothing of going on the streets again. It was a hard and a dirty life, but every one knows best what he is fitted for. Vincent gradually began to understand. Her feelings were not the result of a moral code that could be improved, but of an inherited instinct. The struggle wore him out, and his powers waned visibly. Then he became obsessed by the desire to work and work and work. How many more years would he live? Six years, or at most ten—he never thought he would live long—and he was still at the beginning. Theo came over to him in the late summer, saw everything, but said nothing. Theo was good, he never said anything, but as usual he noticed the rags Vincent was dressed in. This was one of Vincent's sore subjects. Theo evaded all questions about the lady in Paris and talked of something else. Their conversation was only designed to kill time. The difference between Theo in his letters and in conversation was really very odd.

Vincent thought of going into the country with Sien and the children, to Drenthe for instance, where they would be among peasants and where living was cheap. Sien made no objection, but she displayed no enthusiasm. As soon as Vincent's back was turned, she went to her prostitute-mother, who instilled very different ideas into her. How he loathed all this town life and longed for the open air; what bliss it would be to be absorbed altogether into Nature! Sien did not even oppose their separation, in fact she seemed to favour the idea. He wrote letters and went all over the town to find work for her, for now she was well and could do any work. At last he found a post for her, but her mother interfered and Sien did nothing to prevent it. Perhaps it would be better, even for Sien, if he went away.

Before he departed he said to her: 'I don't suppose you will be able

Storm and Stress

to be altogether honest, but be as honest as you can. I'll try to be as straight as I can myself, although I can tell you right away that I shall never get through life as I should like. . . . Even if you are only a poor woman and a prostitute, as long as you act so that your children find a real mother in you, you will in spite of all your faults, be good in my eyes. . . . I will try too. I must work hard, and so must you!

September 1883 he spent on the moors in Drenthe, where there were flocks of sheep guarded by bare-kneed shepherds and turf-carts drawn by black and white horses. Occasionally small, wretched women passed by with children in their arms; a sight which called up other visions in his mind. Sien of course was a bad woman, but Vincent knew her so well that there was really nothing bad left. She was not a good woman, because she could not recognize goodness when she saw it. He ought to have shown it to her, but somehow he could not manage it. Perhaps he was too bad himself. There were moments when Sien's face wore an expression like a *Mater Dolorosa* by Delacroix, and somehow there was an element in her being quite different from her mother, with her instinctive longing for a brothel.

Garvani once said: 'Every time I deserted one of them, something died in me.' Vincent did not desert many, and it is by no means certain that it was not he who was deserted this time. At all events the only escape from shame and remorse was work. But work, which was ultimately the most potent factor in his separation from Sien, was not to Vincent a means of righting a wrong, and now that he had escaped from her, work seemed denied to him. His peace was gone. The moors would be desolate, were they a thousand times fairer, while the spirit of the artist was divorced from the landscape. The black and white horses were just horses, and the flocks of sheep and the cottages just sheep and

Vincent van Gogh

cottages. Subject to certain conditions Vincent's creative force would have breathed upon them, and they would have come to life on his canvas, but one of these conditions was his union with Sien. He ran away from her to Nature, and he had—who knows?—separated himself from Nature irretrievably. Theo wrote in a similar vein. There were difficulties at the Gallery and he was dissatisfied with the compromise of his existence. The peasant peeped out in Vincent's Parisian brother occasionally. Theo had always hoped that he could keep his hold on Nature in the city, and remain a human being in spite of trade, because Paris seemed to him like Nature. His hopes were shattered. He felt that the town was too strong for him, it made him wicked and unhappy. To trade in art was revolting. Theo sometimes felt inclined to escape to America instead of taking the obvious course of going into the country and painting. Vincent sometimes felt inclined to enlist in the Dutch Colonial Force in the East Indies. He had no home, no money, no tools to work with; he was a tramp, just as in his worst days in La Borinage, when he went to Courrières to meet a man of sensibility. Were there such people, people who possess sensibility? Life was black like the corner of a peasant's cottage in Drenthe.

Life continued, for it would be despicable not to continue the process of living, and the mere continuation brought with it, quite naturally, new hope. It was not hard to guess what ailed Theo. If only he would do it! Every line was proof of his hunger for an artist's life, for simplicity, which can be found nowhere but in the country. Nobody would attempt to deny that a part of Theo belonged to Paris, but not the whole, nor the best part. Part of him was still *vierge*, and it wanted to take root and blossom. Could one not assist it?

Very circumspectly Vincent tried to seduce his brother, although he



POTATOES

1887/88

Storm and Stress

could offer him no allurements, he the vagabond, the sceptic, the hungry alms-taker. His experience with Sien had made him more importunate than ever, for was not Theo forced to give up his Parisian Sien too? Surely some conclusions could be drawn from this parallel. One of the brothers fought his battle alone in Paris, the other alone in Holland. Would it not be wiser to struggle together and to support each other? Two friends who have faith in each other must be invincible. Vincent had already learned something and could help Theo, and Theo could help him not a little. Vincent's own work would improve if he had companionship. Theo only refrained from taking the plunge because of some stupid theory about talent. What was wanted was the capacity 'to stretch out your hands and grapple with it.' It had nothing to do with skill and talent—that was sheer drivel. A painter became a painter by painting. He needed practice, industry and experience, but no high-faluting abstractions. He must love his work and have determination. 'Painters are in modern society what Puritans used to be. The point at issue is not some crazy religiosity or ecstasy, but something solid and simple. . . .' The Pilgrim Fathers, a mere handful of men and women, left the Old World and sailed in the *Mayflower* to America. They were determined to live out their simplicity, and they overcame the primeval forest. Carlyle told their story in his *Heroes and Hero-Worship*. The modern solution was different. If Theo despaired in Paris, he did not need to go to America, where he would find only another Europe. And in the East Indies it would be just the same. Art is the America of the modern Pilgrims, and it must be sought elsewhere, certainly not in towns, somewhere in the country.

Vincent was Theo's conscience. In Theo the ideas of the townsman warred with the instincts of the peasant. He was not indifferent to the

Vincent van Gogh

considerations which moved Vincent, but they failed to touch the nerve which would have stimulated him to action. His was not a fighting nature. The reasons which prevented him from following his instinctive leanings were innumerable as the houses of Paris. 'I'm not an artist,' said Theo. 'How coarse that is,' replied Vincent. 'How coarse, even to think it! Have you no patience to learn from Nature, to learn from the growing blade of corn? Are you so heartless as to believe that you yourself will not grow and develop? Why oppose your own nature intentionally? . . . If you want to grow, you must first dig yourself into the soil. I tell you, plant yourself in the soil of Drenthe, where you will blossom, and don't wither away on the pavement!' What was to happen? 'Theo, I assure you, I much prefer to think about how arms and legs and heads are joined to the body, than to worry whether I am an artist in the highest or the lowest sense.' Work was all that mattered. You must do it with a strong conviction that it was worth while, like a peasant when he goes to plough his field. 'If you have not got a horse, you must just be your own horse. There are plenty of people who manage like that in Drenthe.' Theo must think about the people of Barbizon, especially Millet. The most detailed financial schemes were considered. The saving effected compared to the expenses in Paris would be enormous, but the main fact was: 'Co-operation does not double your power for good, it multiplies it. . . .'

Vincent's scheme seemed to Theo, who had learnt something of the world in Paris, like a phantastic dream. Of course there were occasions when he felt inclined to exchange the real troubles of the present for the impossible charms of Vincent's phantasy. There were people whose eyes were always fixed on such visions, and who, like Vincent, acted in obedience to them. There is often but a single step from such courage



ROSES

1887/88

Storm and Stress

to levity, and what was strength in Vincent would be weakness in Theo. Besides he could lighten Vincent's lot, and what would happen if he failed him? In the meantime life had become smooth again in the Goupil Galleries, and it was possible even there to effect much. This was Theo's sphere of action; to leave it meant to give up the struggle. And the struggle was no less interesting in Paris than in Drenthe. Theo was sometimes prepared, but not always, to regard the events that took place in Paris as insignificant. But there were moments when this enormous structure was rather imposing, and these Parisians, these numbers of people of esprit and culture, did not seem like puppets. Did he lack the heroism to go to Drenthe? Heroism was a profession to which one must be specially suited, otherwise one was ludicrous, especially in Paris. When Vincent received letters written in this vein he used to reach out for the nearest object—then smash it, laughing strangely.

Nature alone kept her promises, kept them only too well. You might wander about with her for ever, and never come to the end. He managed to get a little nearer, but only a yard, a foot, an inch at a time. Sometimes Vincent's progress was almost imperceptible, although he worked from early morn till late at night. The slowness of his progress was due to the exaggerated thoroughness with which he attacked his problems. He attempted to advance at the same time along too wide a front, and with too great a variety of *motifs*. Not only personal longing made him cry out for his brother, but the nature of his battle demanded reinforcements to clear away the innumerable obstacles that lay in his path. The assistance of his brother seemed all the more natural, because according to Vincent the problem before them was one of amassing sufficient material, and not one of creative action. Once this task had been executed,

Vincent van Gogh

then the possibility of future co-operation was assured. Theo had metaphysical conceptions about art. Vincent saw in art nothing but a penetration into nature. Behind Theo's metaphysics he discerned the weakness of the townsman.



WASHERWOMEN

1888

Chapter III
De Ardappeleter

Chapter III

De Ardappeleter

SOLITUDE drove the wanderer home at Christmas to Nuenen, a small village in Brabant, to which his parents had moved. Possibly Vincent was driven there not only by his loneliness but also by his miscalculation of his brother, who had perhaps refrained from carrying out his own wishes because he was too proud to shelve the financial burden Vincent imposed on him. It was no easy matter for him to accept money, not even from Theo, not even if he spent the money only on bare necessities and fared worse than a labourer. He could only take it subject to certain assumptions tacitly understood, but they were not always understood. There were dark hours when Vincent in his loneliness considered his relationship with his brother rather one-sided. Possibly Theo had a similar feeling. Vincent wrote ten pages and Theo replied in haste. Of course Theo's time was occupied, but still he could easily have made time, if . . . it was wiser not to think about it.

Once upon a time two brothers went over the snow-laden moors to the mill that stood at Rijswijk; they were two poor artist-brothers, and they agreed about Life and about their God, and but a single heart beat in their two breasts. Then one of them went that way, earned his living, became a polished man of the world, and thus forgot the old mill at Rijswijk. The other brother went this way, became crude and rough, never earned a farthing, but he stuck to the mill at Rijswijk. . . .

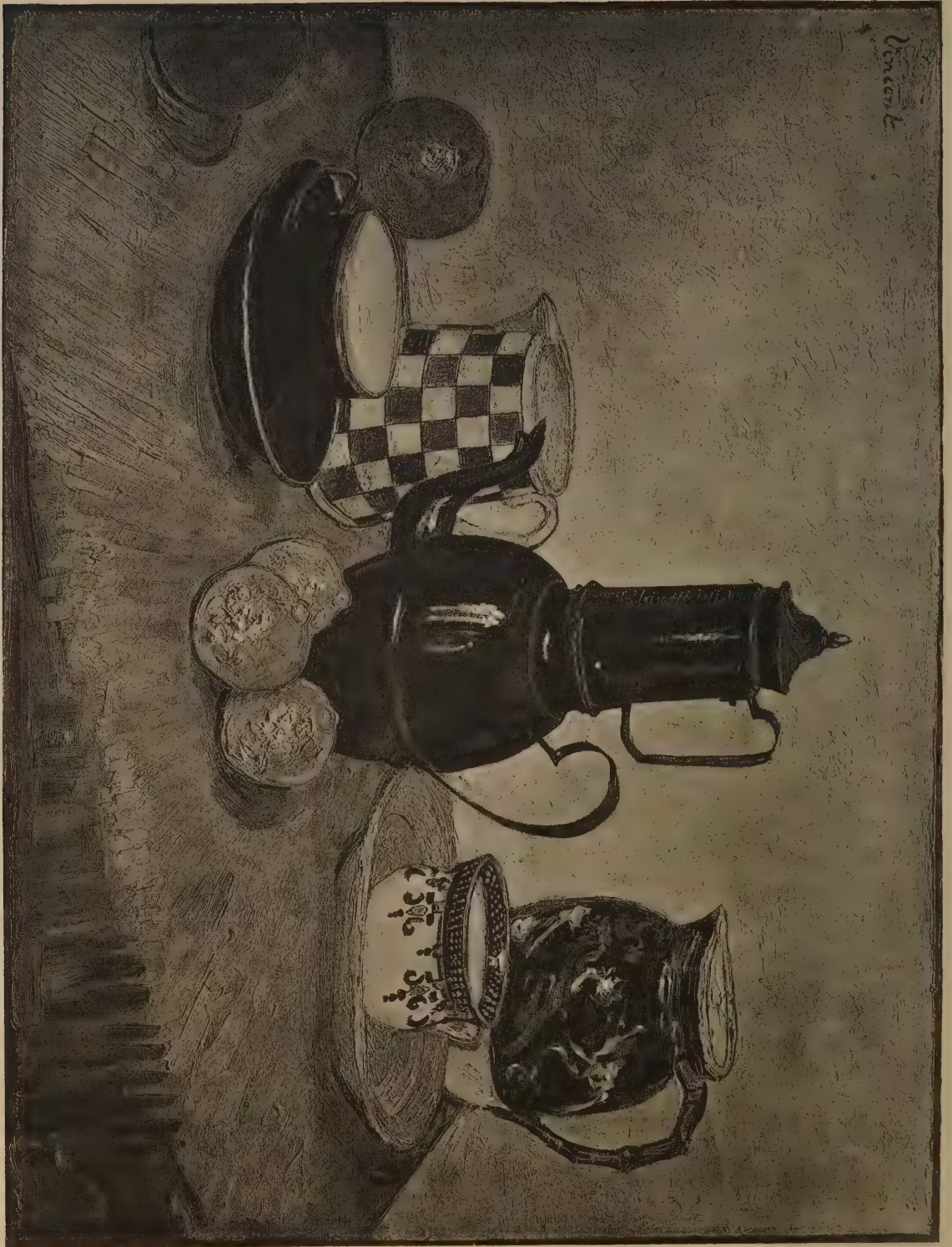
The immaculate rectory of Nuenen was invaded by a large shaggy hound with wet paws. 'He was in everybody's way, and he barked furiously. In short, a filthy brute!' Another kennel had to be found.

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‘The beast might get rabid, and bite some one, and then the keeper would have to shoot him. Well, that couldn’t be helped. On the other hand, dogs can keep guard over houses, but that was hardly necessary in times of peace and quiet when there was no fear of danger. The dog, however, was sorry that he had not stayed away, although no one was nasty to him. The beast’s visit was just weakness.’

The beast barked louder yet, for he was hungry. The inmates of the rectory sat closer together when he appeared, and they dropped their voices. They did not drop them so low that they were not understood, especially as no one suspected such a shaggy beast of having delicate ears. And he really did not need his ears—the way they eyed him was enough. How they stared at his coat! Were those his parents? Did they but know it, he might have been much coarser had he been a respectable money-grubber. He was tempted to assume the brutality they suspected him of, and then they were surprised. His father wrote to Theo and Theo wrote to Vincent. No one dared to talk to him like that to his face, not even Theo. But letters could suggest the ingratitude of the son whose existence served no better purpose than to embitter the lives of his parents. Vincent felt inclined to break for ever with them all, especially those who could write such letters, and he longed to cast their alms into their gold-filled teeth. But what could he do then? How draw, how paint, how pursue his business, which was after all more important than all his family and their cruelty to animals?

Vincent with difficulty prevailed upon his family to allow him to use the wash-house as a studio. No one could blame his parents for their hesitation, and no one could blame Vincent if their hesitation did not sweeten his temper. Fortunately there were weavers in Nuenen, and looms were to be found in low-roofed cottages standing on floors of clay



STILL LIFE
1888

De Ardappeleter

—most of them were as ancient as the hills, and their age had given them a fine colour. An old man sat at one of them, and near him on a tiny chair, a little child, who watched the shuttle as it flew backwards and forwards hour after hour. A small space like the room with the loom, and those two people in it, would be a splendid subject for a drawing or a picture. There were all kinds of lights that played between the clay-floor, the ceiling, and the loom, and on the wrinkled face of the old weaver.

Theo wrote again in his old friendly way. Vincent must not forget that his pigheadedness made enemies for him even among those who loved him, and one day it might cut him off from everybody. Vincent could understand that, and he had nothing whatever to say in reply. People whose minds were full of their work were inconvenient, even if they were not the least little bit vain about it. But why did not his roughness and his pigheadedness repulse simple folk? Why did the weavers let him come into their tiny rooms and willingly huddle themselves together to make room for him to draw? They were not his relations, they did not even know him. There was no denying his family were a queer lot. He often felt a closer kinship with these wrinkled weavers than with his own flesh and blood. When his mother had an accident and hurt her leg this ruffian suddenly became the model son. He nursed her day and night, and displayed such tenderness that every one wondered at his skill and experience in the care of others.

He went over to The Hague to fetch his things and incidentally looked up Sien. Strange to relate she had not gone under, but had fought her way through life for her children and herself as a hard-working washer-woman. But she was ill again and wretched. Probably she was more miserable now than when Vincent was with her, and it was quite

Vincent van Gogh

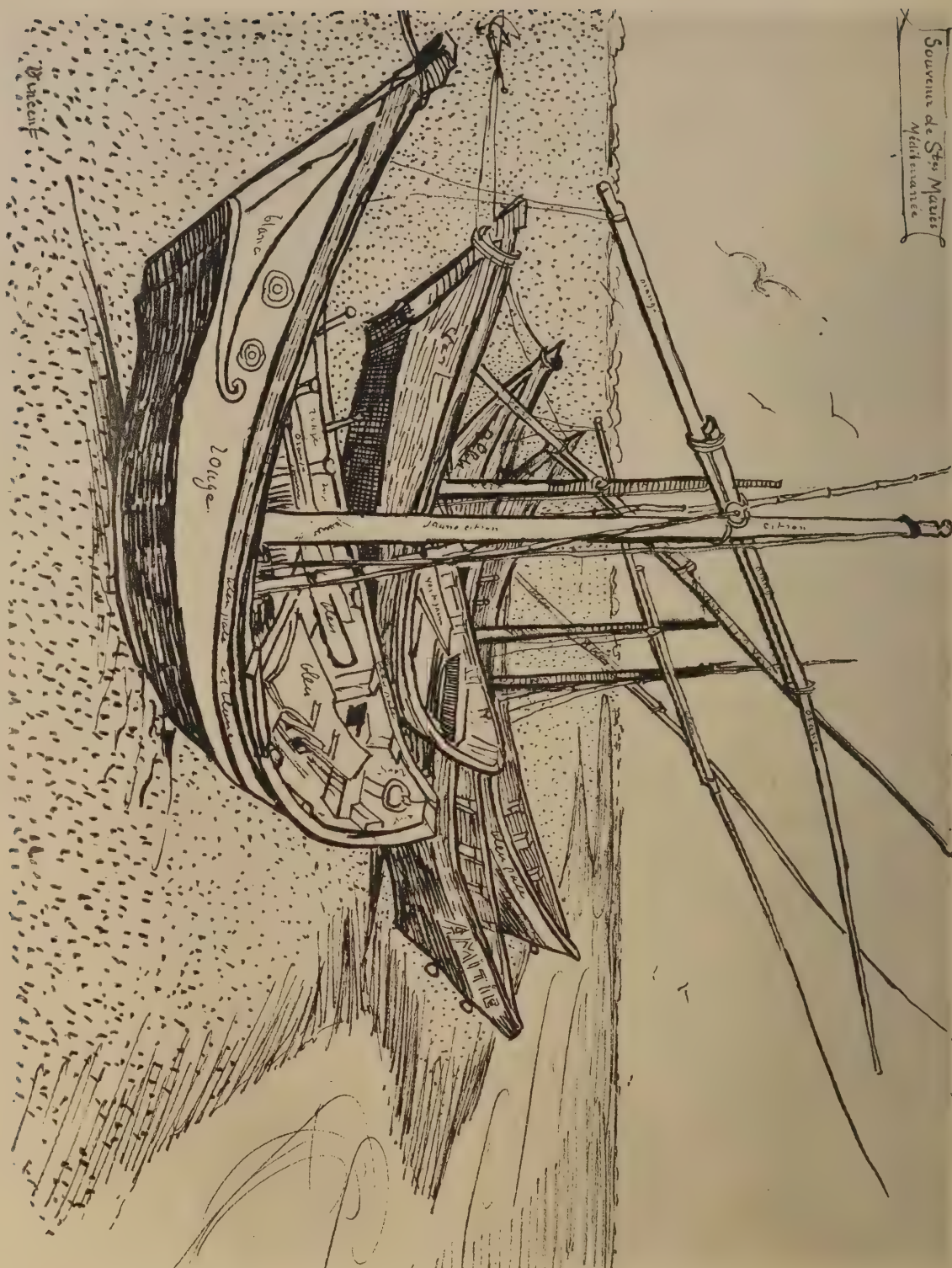
possible that she never really wanted to go back to her brothel, but had only pretended, to annoy him or to test him. It was an open question whether Vincent or the prostitute had failed to stand the test.

Once more a woman crossed his path. This time a respectable neighbour of his parents. Vincent went out for walks with her occasionally. Like her predecessors, she was much older than Vincent. She was a woman of a mystic turn of mind, 'a Cremona-violin, originally a rare specimen, which had been tampered with by fumbling amateurs, but even so the fiddle still possessed peculiar merit.'

Theo warned him as usual, and Vincent as usual refused to listen. He tried to mend the Cremona, and he succeeded. Her family said he disturbed her peace of mind; he said he stirred her dead melancholy. He succeeded in drawing melodious sounds from the violin—at any rate, under his fingers. If the fiddle were cracked, never mind as long as the sound it produced was in harmony! He succeeded in awakening her, and driven crazy by her family, she took strychnine to escape from her dilemma. This was Vincent's last adventure with the opposite sex; like his visit, it was a weakness. How absurd was the love of these respectable people who took poison instead of struggling with themselves! How absurd was their mysticism which they called religion!

'Didn't I tell you so?' wrote Theo. 'Was that necessary?' 'Yes, Theo, *quand même*, inevitable!'

The dog barked more and more furiously. The rectory was appalled, and Theo's ears fairly hummed when he read his mail. The baying hound in Nuenen resented his treatment; he was sick of their shallow tolerance, he could get on without any Parisian sarcasm, he loathed verbosity. Why on earth did Theo not sell his work? If the pictures were not mature enough for these Parisians who could see no art in



BOATS AT ST. MARIES
QUILL DRAWING 1888

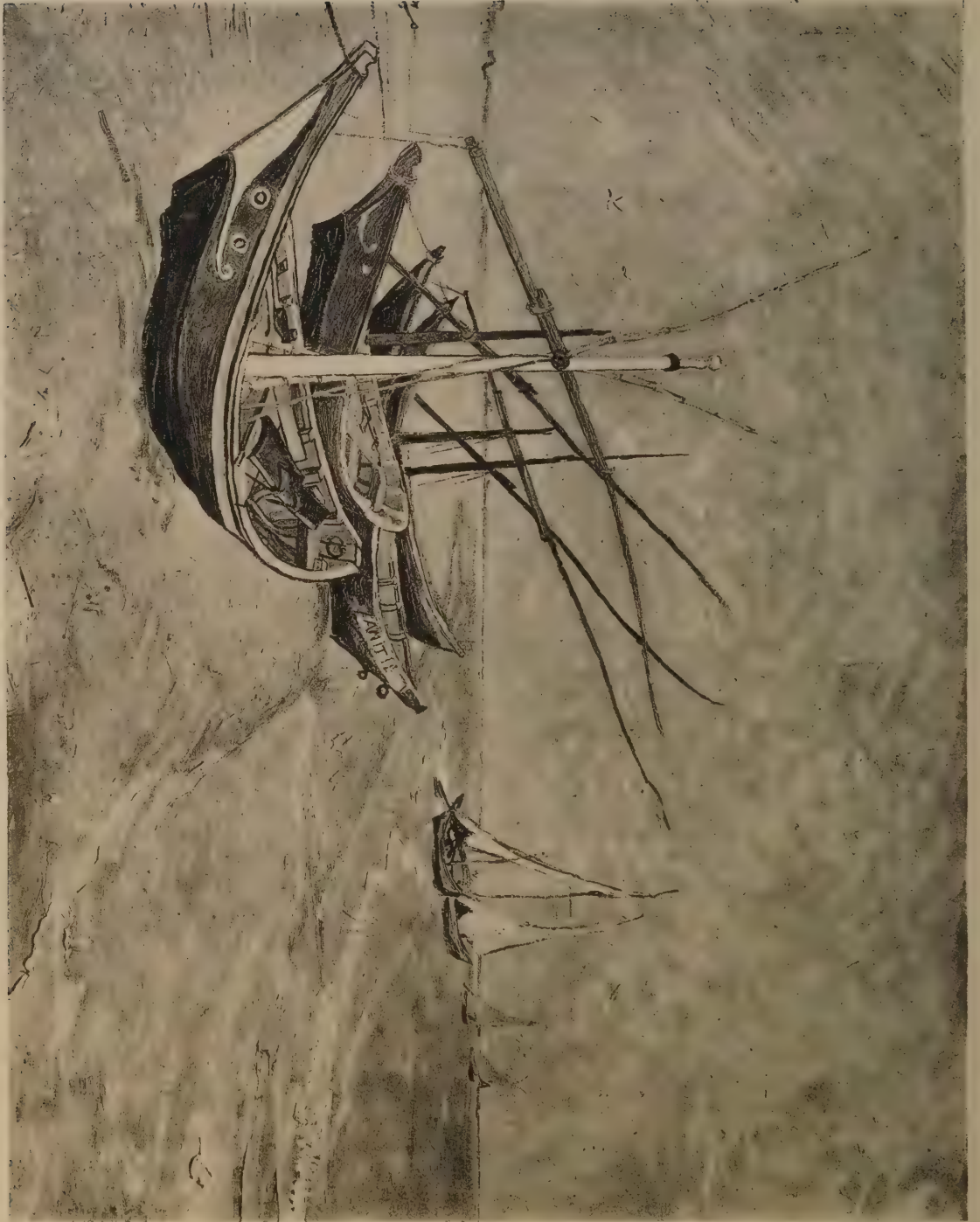
De Ardappeleter

wooden clogs, then the drawings, at any rate, were worth something. The yarn about the impossibility of selling them was too old a chestnut. If Theo was an art-dealer, why didn't he show them how to do it? How else could he help an artist? 'You can't give me a wife, you can't give me a child, you can't give me work. Money—yes. What can I do with it?' He barked loudly. To divert him Theo wrote about the Delacroix exhibition in Paris. Vincent loved Delacroix nearly as much as Millet, but almost any subject can be made the peg on which to hang aphorisms. For instance, the Barricade picture would probably be shown at the Delacroix exhibition. Perhaps Theo would imagine for a moment that they were not living in the year of grace, 1884, but in the year that picture was painted. In 1848 all kinds of ragged fellows stood by the side of the Michelets and the students, like the peasant-artists of Barbizon. On the other side, close to Guizot and Louis Philippe, were Goupil, Vincent's father, and his grandfather—all serious and respectable people. . . . 'In the year 1884 there are perhaps no barricades, but there is a spiritual struggle. The old mill has passed away, but the wind which moved it is blowing still. And in my opinion we stand in opposite camps; there's no getting over that. Whether you like it or not you must join your lot and I mine. We can't help one another like two people who are on the same side. If we meet at all it would be in the middle of a hail of bullets. My bad temper is a bullet, not aimed at you, my brother, but at the enemy in general in whose ranks you happen to stand. . . . I don't regard your offensive superiority as being aimed intentionally at me, but you just fire at the barricade and you think you are doing good service, but I happen to stand behind the barricade. Of course this is all metaphorical, but who can say whether it be the result of human will-power or whether it is pre-ordained? Can you blame the

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clouds because some are the vehicles of positive and others of negative electricity? Of course men aren't clouds. . . . Is it your own determination or blind destiny which divides us into opposite camps? . . . Once upon a time there were two brothers. They stood by the old mill at Rijswijk, and they fell one after the other in the same cause.'

Although Vincent barked loudly during the two years in Nuenen he also created pictures. The landscapes he had painted in Drenthe were moods which had prematurely turned into pictures. They were like pen drawings in oils. The painter could not as yet resolve the successful element in his studies into a painted canvas; he still suffered from the illusion that drawing and painting were of a different nature, and that a painting had to be a kind of illustration. The influence of Millet, Breton, Michelet, which never escaped the incorruptible eye of Theo, was all the more harmful because Vincent knew their work only from photographs. The printed page was Vincent's only means of intercourse, even in Nuenen, but in the meantime he had come to Nature, or rather he had come to himself. His longing for Nature finally killed his tendency to illustration. Illustrating had been bliss, it symbolized the studio with the cradle and the rocking-chair, and had to be etched away by loneliness and despair. Only when Nature becomes a painter's sole possession can he paint her. An artist simply takes a piece of Nature, sucks it dry, lives on it day and night like a dog with a bone. Then, and then only, can he get to grips with his subject. Up to then Vincent's pictures had been interiors, men at their work, and landscapes with animals and human beings, but the kernel of his work now became the human face. He wanted to produce fifty heads of peasants—only heads; and when he had done them, another fifty, in order to create the one head that contained all the others; he called it painting



BOATS AT ST. MARIES
WATER—COLOUR 1888

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a type. His eyes devoured the structure of hollow cheeks, angular chins, and turned-up peasants' noses. His own face grew like that, in it too could be seen traces of digging with a spade. He painted the features of men who lived in the earth and by it, his lines were the lines of peasants, his surfaces peasant surfaces. His pencil was a plough and thus Breton and the literary rubbish fell from him as the husk falls from its kernel. Look at his Sower! Read for yourself! Such heads will one day seem to others as the painted faces of Egyptian mummies seem to us. They prove more indisputably than the whole of history that thousands of years ago, before there was any such thing as art-dealing, there were men on earth like ourselves—incredible creatures, for they resemble us.

The isolated lines disappeared into a solid mass that forms a picture. Once the heads were all drawn, nothing was simpler than to shovel them together, to complete the rest of the peasant, and thus to plough over his work and his field. Vincent aimed solely at the peasant tilling his soil and the weaver weaving his cloth. He believed his aim to be a new goal, for the old painters of peasants had never thought, it seemed to him, of painting the peasant at work. 'The real aim of modern art is to produce what neither Greece, nor the Renaissance, nor the old Dutchmen ever produced.' He was right, because he succeeded in presenting in the structure of a peasant's bones the very essence of peasants, because we do not care whether we are looking at Dutch peasants or old Egyptians. The human element of his pictures was stronger than the species they represented. To Vincent there could be no separation between a peasant and a human being, and so he also ceased to separate drawing and painting, at any rate in his conception of them. He painted with his pen and especially with charcoal. His best drawings date from this period. The terrific weight and power of his hand gave colour to the

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blackness of his charcoal. He drew newly ploughed fields with the light playing on them, so that we gaze at them as if they were something tremendously good to eat. There is a sweet dampness in these black depths, and in the lighter patches it becomes soft like hair, almost like flesh, and yet remains the blackness of a ploughed field at morning and at night. There is something incredibly sombre in it all, something of Van Gogh's melancholy, and also a festive glamour which belonged to another side of Vincent. Vincent, who had been banished from the realm of light, had the power of giving luminosity to his melancholy.

In the spring of 1885 he painted 'De Ardappeleters,' a room at night full of peasants at their meal. It is a collection of the heads he had drawn. At that time he was under the influence of Delacroix' theories, which he had pieced together for himself from essays. Delacroix once asserted in conversation that the best pictures were painted extempore. Extempore! The expression penetrated into the very marrow of Vincent, who had wrested every line so far from nature. Extempore! That was what he had lacked when he tried to preach. He had taken it then for a sign that he had not been called. He had shipwrecked on that rock! If he was destined to be a painter he would just have to paint extempore. It seemed as if he could manage it; he painted 'De Ardappeleters,' the potato-eaters, extempore. There was a flavour—he said it himself—of dirty potatoes in the picture. A shaggy, gruff picture, with smeary heads, but it had a life of its own. You can read the story of a past and of a future in it. The picture found its way to Paris. Theo took it to Portier, the only dealer who showed any interest in the newcomer. Theo and Portier both complained of the dirty messiness of the colouring. What a palette, in the age of Impressionism, at a time when all the younger generation used light colours! Vincent laughed. He was going

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to paint in darker tones and much dirtier colours yet. There was often luminosity in the dirt, more luminosity than in the bluest of blue skies. Look at Rembrandt! Read what Delacroix had to say about it! Impressionism indeed! Was that a new 'ism'? They must be a rum lot, these Impressionists, who burst their sides with laughter at Millet and Israels. If they weren't careful they'd burst altogether! These Parisians must always have some new-fangled notion. He would, by their leave, be faithful to his old Dutchmen.

At that time an acquaintance, a tanner called Kerssemakers, took him to the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. In the waiting-room, his favourite haunt, he hurriedly made another sketch. Then came the train. Nothing could tear him away from the 'Jewish Wedding.' He stood and gaped at it. He would have given ten years of his life gladly if he could have sat for fourteen days in front of this picture. This journey exercised an influence on his work. In Nuenen he forgot the museums, which were like wonderful books. You could test for yourself all the theories of Delacroix, which he had read about, concerning colour and contrasts and tone-values. You could learn an immense deal in three days, and you learned things that never would have occurred to you in Nuenen. What you needed most among your peasants you had of course to learn by yourself, but once you had learnt it, then such picture-books as the Rijksmuseum were wonderfully helpful.

The studies Vincent made shortly after the *ArdappeleTERS* owe the softening of their previous earthy crudity to this brief span of passionate study. His *motifs* were still chosen quite at random. A few potatoes, a brass pot and a peasant's basket were all he needed to create a whole series of still-lives. They were simple like peasant pottery, and his palette was constituted chiefly of an earthy potato colour. But these

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limitations of colour and subject produced a remarkably cultured style. There are luminous copper tones in his potato-greys and in his 'soap-green colour.' Vincent arrived at his effects with these tones, not with the local colour. Quite imperceptibly he managed, with soft broad strokes of his brush, to raise his subjects from mere naturalism into the realm of the old Dutch masters. These studies do not remind you of the men he honoured, like Mauve and Israels. They resemble rather in tone, painters like Van der Neer, Ostade and his beloved Chardin, although they are not echoes of any one master in particular. His manner is absolutely personal, but such as might come from the close study of the old masters. Most painters who have had the good fortune to strike such a chord in their compositions content themselves for the rest of their lives with playing variations on it. Vincent was saved from this pitfall by his modesty; this was only a beginning. He felt he must approach the old masters still more closely. His letters simply swarmed with reflections on their methods of painting, and in between the heads of Nuenen peasants we see the ghosts of Hals and Rembrandt and many others. His correspondence began to resemble the *Journal de Delacroix*, and Theo proved to be stimulating. It was delightful to discuss art with him. He was not smitten by the spell of Parisian fashion, and he did not look at art from the Boulevard, he was a sound judge and a thinker. He did not, for instance, accept the palette of the modern painters as a criterion of art, and he could distinguish very clearly between sincerity and charlatanism. When he accused Israels, whom Vincent over-estimated, of lack of harmony, it was by no means a caprice. Theo, on his side, enjoyed the powerful agility of Vincent's mind. Vincent substituted for lack of experience his intuition, which made giant strides. Every time Theo penned an opinion on an old master, or propounded



LANDSCAPE

1888

De Ardappeleter

a new theory, he found that he got little change out of Vincent when his reply arrived at the end of three days. Vincent would dare launch conclusions, which Theo would never have ventured to embark on, from the slightest suggestion. It was very jolly to have such a brother. All his rural roughness and his crudities were just super-imposed colours which contained the most luminous qualities. Perhaps the public would never recognize him, and perhaps his art would never attain to the stature of the man; both were more than likely. But whatever values he created would outlive any theory of painting—that was certain.

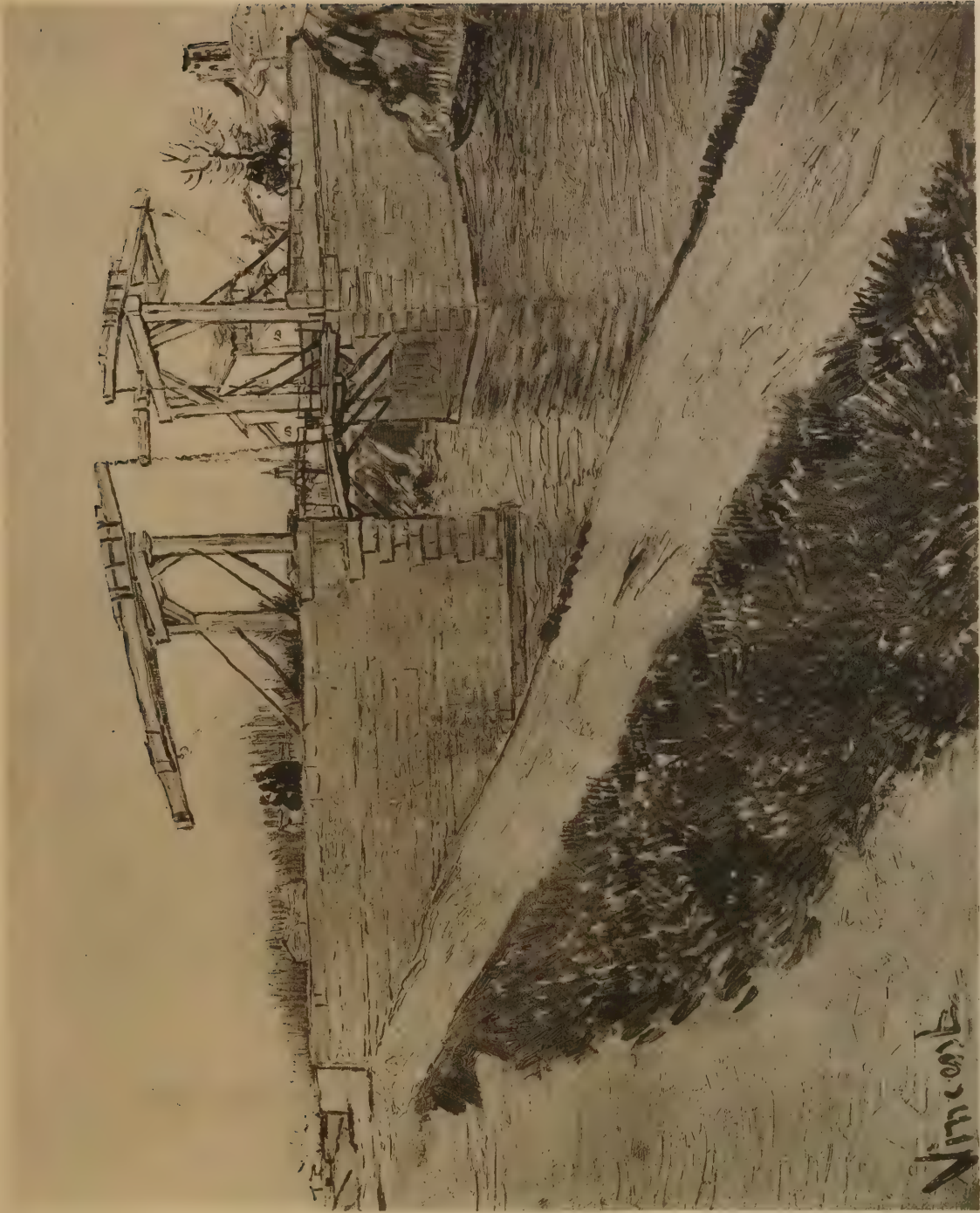
Towards the end of November in 1885, Van Gogh went to Antwerp for a few months. Theo thought he went to see Rubens, but Vincent, the connoisseur, wanted to see a few pictures by Jan Lys. If the truth were known he also longed for museums and art schools. He worked at the Academy in order to get cheap models. Once again he was so short of money that he had not enough even to buy dry bread, and he began to feel the effects of this monotonous diet together with acute mental exertion. The fear of an early grave, which never left him, increased his passion for work, and his furious labours only brought the danger nearer. After all it would be a pity to depart this life too soon, because you might, if you lived, see all kinds of excitements—a revolution for instance. Vincent's simplicity, which was not so simple, divined the 'end of Society.'

And in Paris there were larger possibilities than in Antwerp, and a few free spirits. There was the Ecole Julian and Cormon. In Antwerp Vincent had of course made enemies of all the professors and students at the Academy. He longed to plunge deeper into the life of a city and to explore all the works the mind of man had created. He did not feel the longing for human intercourse, he had learnt to do without that,

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but he felt a desire to speed up the machine with which he could liberate himself. He might perhaps be able to learn many useful lessons from Manet, when all was said and done. Impressionism could not, after all, just be dismissed, and how much he could learn now from Delacroix! Ten years ago his head was stuffed with religion, and even if it did not prevent him from using his eyes, it had hindered him none the less from turning his vision into creative form. He was prepared now to carry off in triumph all the glories of the Louvre. The whole of his activity so far had been confined to the making of vessels in which to garner the harvest. Even then he was working at fifty heads and fifty baskets and pots for the fruit that was to come. He made studies, too, from the antique to understand structure better, and he painted valleys, cottages, rivers, animals and every creeping thing. Now he felt ready for the world that hustled and bustled in the distance. Up and at it! He longed to turn over the pages of the great picture-book of the Louvre with Theo, and then go home and smoke a pipe and unpack all their mutual discoveries. Would it not be glorious? They had never really been together. How curious not to have noticed that before!

Of course, it would be very jolly, Theo confessed cautiously. Theo was afraid he might disappoint Vincent. Oh, he was cautious, just as if he were dealing with some one whom he did not know. But were they not two creatures who had no one in the world except each other? Perhaps Vincent ought to go first to his widowed mother in Brabant and help her to move out of the rectory. Vincent grew impatient. His father was dead, he could not restore him to life. Possibly he had died long ago, and one must live—yes, live! Going to Brabant meant going backwards, and he would lose time, which was perhaps more precious now than ever. He suffered from fever. The doctor thought that if he



THE DRAWBRIDGE

1888

Vincent

De Ardappeleter

did not take care of himself he might develop typhoid. Fevers like that could only be cured in Paris. Theo suggested that Vincent should come in June, and he would take another flat and have everything ready for him. Vincent's fever grew worse, and it had to be cured at once. He would come in April, or better still in March! Antwerp was dead, everything was dead except Paris.

On the 27th of February a note was handed to Theo in the Gallery. He was to go to the Louvre at once, to the Rembrandt in the Salon Carré.



TREES IN BLOSSOM AT ARLES

1888

Chapter IV
The Brothers in Paris

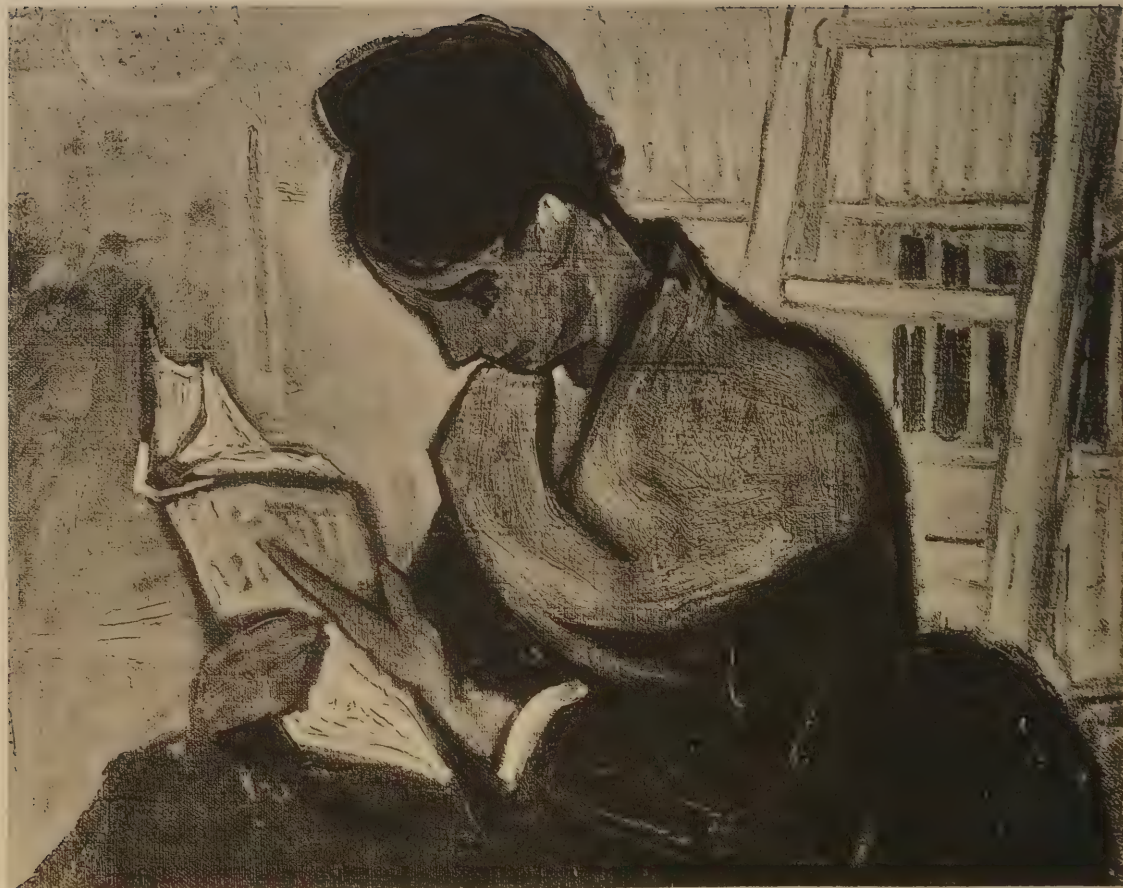
Chapter IV

The Brothers in Paris

PARIS was Vincent's real training ground, not only for art, but also for life. He found here something besides duties and burdens, and he shouldered what he found without having to stoop for it. If his foothold had been less firm he might have been bewildered and slipped in the confusion of his new impressions. Art in Paris was a different world from art in Holland. It was a kind of lantern, by whose rays you found your way about even in the heart of the city; it illuminated the soul of the metropolis and gave you the eyes of one of her citizens. Paris was to Vincent far more than a prodigious city; it was a world properly divided into streets and squares filled with men and their stories, and it contained besides the fleeting present, the past and the future. Of course Paris would have been quite different without the gentle guidance of his brother. Theo was at first almost a nurse, so carefully did he prepare this immense material in advance for Vincent. His almost imperceptible guidance led Vincent straight to the spot he wanted. He began to read the great tome of French tradition, and also the smaller volumes, the Boulevard publications. The Studio of Cormon was just one of these, which owed its reputation not to the profundity of its founder, whose views barely differed from the theories of the Ecole Julian, but to its tolerance. Vincent joined Cormon's studio for the sake of meeting the students, and because Theo's little flat was not large enough to paint in. There he made the acquaintance of the funny dwarf Toulouse Lautrec, who was really a count, and whose ability was simply incredible, and he got to know the lanky Anquetin,

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and little Emile Bernard, all young fellows whom he could talk to. He discovered before long that this object could also be achieved outside the studio, and these conversations did him good. For ten years he had been dumb, and his silence had developed into an impediment. But here every one had their own doubts and disappointments, and they helped each other. In Holland he had been a stranger, and his solitude there had been all the more oppressive because he was surrounded by familiar objects and people who spoke his own tongue. In Paris all these sinister ghosts had vanished, and he found himself listening to confidences in a foreign language. Those people behaved like that quite naturally, and just because everything seemed to be treated with a kind of professional candour. What were intimacies in Holland were the order of the day here, and perhaps intimacy only depended on the choice of subjects that it was worth while to discuss in common. Theo was a master of all these delightful mysteries. Every one appreciated his cool, workman-like manner. He hardly ever made any promises to the many young men who came to him, but he always did more than he had undertaken for them. The manager of the Goupil Gallery had at last allowed him to exhibit in the *entresol* of their house on the Boulevard Montmartre the more promising canvases of the younger generation and at that time Paris was full of such pictures. You could find good art in other galleries. Durand Ruel had acquired a large collection of Monet and Renoir, as well as of Manet and Degas, but he confined his collection to these great lights and refused to add another name. Theo exhibited not absolutely representative works of the older generation, but studio pictures that painters liked to see, and also the plain confessions of the younger apostles. The small *entresol* brimmed over with life. These rooms were of course part of the Goupil Gallery, and Theo was



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The Brothers in Paris

obliged to sell poor stuff, but he kept it for Americans. Vincent entered and stared. Theo's letters had given him an idea about Impressionism, its theory and technique, but its practice was a revelation. He felt like a foreigner who had learnt the language with a dictionary and then suddenly received a proposal of marriage in French. Painting in Paris was one long proposal, for art was too personal there to allow dogma any play. Moreover Impressionism in those days was not a one-sided dogma, but a well-ordered attitude to life. The Impressionists were men before they became painters. The year 1886 found them all at their best. Claude Monet, still possessed of his dramatic powers, was painting his Belle-Isle seascapes, and had not yet embarked on his weary series. Renoir had already parted ways with Monet. Though few realized it then, he was demonstrating the possibilities of his group in his own way. Pissarro, Sisley, Guillaumin were at the zenith of their power and were surrounded by many others. The one quality they all had in common was their light palette. The common link that bound these diverse natures together was proof for Vincent of the permanent quality of their art, in fact it constituted to his mind a miracle which extended far beyond the sphere of painting. There seemed to be other things in this world besides misery, greed and hatred, some power that could unite these new concepts. Vincent had believed that such a unity could only exist among peasants in the country. He had imagined a city to be filled with idiots, idlers and adventurers, who robbed God and mankind, tricked Nature of her forces, and the Sun of his golden rays. And suddenly he found sunshine in the city and its inhabitants had become new creatures. He had pictured them as flashy conversationalists, cautious and calculating, and he found plain country people, with simple emotions, able craftsmen who knew their business and got on with it

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instead of talking too much about it. Everything was plain sailing. Now he could understand Theo; of course he would not exchange Paris for Nuenen or Drenthe. Here a common inspiration made a community of individuals, and spurred them to creative work. Vincent's life seemed so changed that he was almost alarmed. He felt as if his specific gravity had suddenly lightened. Was there ever such another spring? Theo and Vincent had moved into their new rooms, high up on top of Montmartre, with the Moulin de la Galette on one side of them and a faery world on the other. People nodded to him as he passed. Everybody knew him, the fat old woman who brought his vegetables, the singing postman, and the flower girl in the little square. Children played about and old women gossiped. There was not a discord and Vincent felt as much at home as in a corner of The Hague. Nobody laughed at his queer manner, nobody was surprised at his clothes, and if they smiled he wanted to join in. Life was a dream, and he almost felt as though he had got rid of his clumsy body altogether. There was music in the air, and he longed to join in the chorus.

The immense sea of houses stretched out before him like the ocean. This was the only city which was a miracle of human creation, a well-composed picture whose surface was ever changing, not an accident made of bricks. Everything performed its well-ordered function; the streets were like throbbing veins under a glistening skin. You descended in a fine sweep down to the Boulevard Clichy. Cheerful couples sat in the cafés, and on the Boulevard there was nothing but couples. Words bounded from one pair to another like little red balloons, and life marched merrily onwards, gazing up at the clouds meanwhile. Then there were the secondhand bookstalls, where he found some new treasure every day for twenty centimes. He discovered the most wonderful



A GIPSY CAMP

1888

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Japanese prints, and he had never suspected such a world as was revealed in them. Their beauty dazzled even the dreams of the painter, helped him to throw overboard all his superfluous ballast, and opened up new possibilities of colour schemes. The most amazing sensation of all was the realization that all these marvels had been made just for the benefit of Paris. Paris could swallow a whole civilization as easily as an oyster. All the painters of the East had toiled only to give this city a new ornament, just to make Paris smile for an instant. Japan was the prop of Impressionism, and Vincent fingered these prints for hours. The real connoisseurs, of course, despised these crude products, and no doubt the old specimens on proper paper were much finer, but they were neither so cheap nor so gay. Just their crude gaiety of colour delighted Vincent, and he found it hard to tear himself away in order to hurry to new discoveries. At the Boulevard Rochechouart, he took the Imperial and rattled behind three horses down the steep Rue des Martyrs. There the scene changed. Every one walked more hurriedly, and the houses looked more solemn. At the corners life teemed like a river that had found a new outlet, and the stream broke up into gaily coloured strips. The three nags trotted on through the silent Rue Lafitte. Every window frame contained a glowing picture. He had to drive, otherwise he would never have reached his destination. In the distance the air over the great multi-coloured boulevard throbbed and tingled. The huge orchestra began to tune its instruments, and a thousand voices joined in the refrain. Suddenly he was in the midst of rows of carriages and shouting multitudes. The house-fronts loomed before him like giant trees covered with exotic birds. Carefully he climbed down the winding steps of his bus and put his feet gingerly into the rushing torrent. Then he steered over to the pavement where the Boulevard Montmartre

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opened out. He felt as if the buses, carriages, lorries, street-lamps, and even the advertisement hoardings, would tumble over the quay. And then the golden letters over the Gallery beckoned to him. There he would find his brother, and that was his home.

Inside he felt as comfortable as if he were sitting round a log fire in the winter. He could watch the working of the vast machine in whose wheels he was himself a tiny cog. Some guiding law governed the turmoil and ran through all the strange commotion. The movement rose and fell like a wave, and he felt its rhythm. There were always surprises, monuments that took his breath away, but even they fulfilled their appointed function and gradually he became accustomed to them, almost familiar. This colossus of a town had the capacity to control its vastness, and the leisure to smile occasionally. He could talk to it. Was its history not an intensified, multiplied record of human existence? Vincent had never dreamed of such a life. Great God, what if Theo had followed him to his peasants!

Theo smiled, and sometimes tired lines played about his lips. Theo was like his brother, only he resembled him as a soft, smooth cast resembles its original mould. Life was very pleasant. You developed and grew, or thought you did, because Paris was in continual process of evolution. You absorbed something of its rhythm, in fact you absorbed a great many things without noticing it. Living in Paris was like swimming without arms or legs. You simply breathed, the rest was done for you. You could not observe whether your being waxed or waned, and your personal contribution became less and less, in fact your personality seemed to vanish altogether. Vincent did not mind. What was his personality? Did it matter? Was it not infinitely better to merge it in a wide community? If only he could do it! It seemed to him that he had



WORKMAN'S SHOES

1888

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brought altogether the wrong baskets and pots and pans with him to Paris. All his vessels were much too clumsy, and he really ought to begin again from the beginning and make them lighter.

He painted flowers. Never had he painted such things before, nor painted as he did then. These flowers supplanted his wooden clogs and his potatoes and even their atmosphere. His earthy colour and his soap-green tones were replaced by the colour of the outside of the Louvre, by a certain rhythmic swing, by the smile and the pathos that lay over Paris, and the rough strokes of the peasant painter gained a pliable grace. Vincent formulated a mighty baroque out of the curved ovals of the petals and the bursting buds. His baroque was as heavy as fruit and as tightly stretched as a bow. He did not paint the ephemeral objects in the vase that bloomed before his eyes, but he created a nobler bouquet, a whole town of bursting buds. Vincent painted Paris in his flowers, and Paris fell into the hollow of his hand like a blossom. The force which guided him was not, strangely enough, the influence of this or that painter, but the pressure of a cosmos, a new Greece, a new Italy. The phenomenon was the more peculiar in that Vincent placed himself deliberately under this influence, and instead of swamping his personality it merely isolated and emphasized it. He not only remained a Dutchman, but the one and only Dutchman who never lost his individuality in Paris. These flowers contain the same power that was revealed in the masks of the ploughmen and weavers of Nuenen. These roses, if you look close, are shod with wooden clogs, and their fragrance is mingled with the smells of Dutch dunes and moors. He came to Paris and reaped the selfsame harvest which, half a century earlier, a typical Frenchman—Watteau—had garnered in Holland. Just as Watteau's spirit was united to the spirit of Van Goyen and Vermeer, so was the

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heart of Vincent wedded to the baroque of Carpeaux and Delacroix. On looking back you can almost believe that you found some tendency to the baroque style in the earlier drawings. This tendency became the source of his style. Many of his flowers are like seascapes whose waves have become leaves. They remind you of simplified still-lives by Monet, but Monet's hand seemed to glide easily into his forms, as if they were a garment held up for him to slip into, whereas Van Gogh's instinctive powers of resistance moulded his forms and his patterns to suit his will. His powerful colouring was inherited from Delacroix, only he did not use the light tones which Renoir loved, but the lustrous deep carpet tones of Delacroix. Vincent's glowing optimism found expression in colour schemes that resembled Delacroix without the Eastern element. His universe was at this time a small one, and seemed to contain nothing but flowers, but this limitation was self-imposed. His still-life is portraiture, and looks as if a legitimate grandson of Rembrandt had taken a Delacroix portrait and had deepened the furrows of its expression. Where was the peasant now, the Ardappeleter, the barking shaggy dog? Where was the sinister past of the anarchist? The Dutchman began to sing melodies from lungs which had nearly atrophied; they were tunes no one had ever heard before in Paris. The traces of his roughness added a new cadence to his art.

His conversation was just the same. There was a rich sonority in his rough speech, and every one who heard him had to take notice. 'Il est drole,' they said, but any one who took the trouble to unravel his ill-strung sentences moved his chair a little nearer. No one knew his past history, which he kept to himself, for it would not have interested any one. He came from some hole. Where else could he come from? Every place was a hole except Paris. The deep note Vincent struck was just

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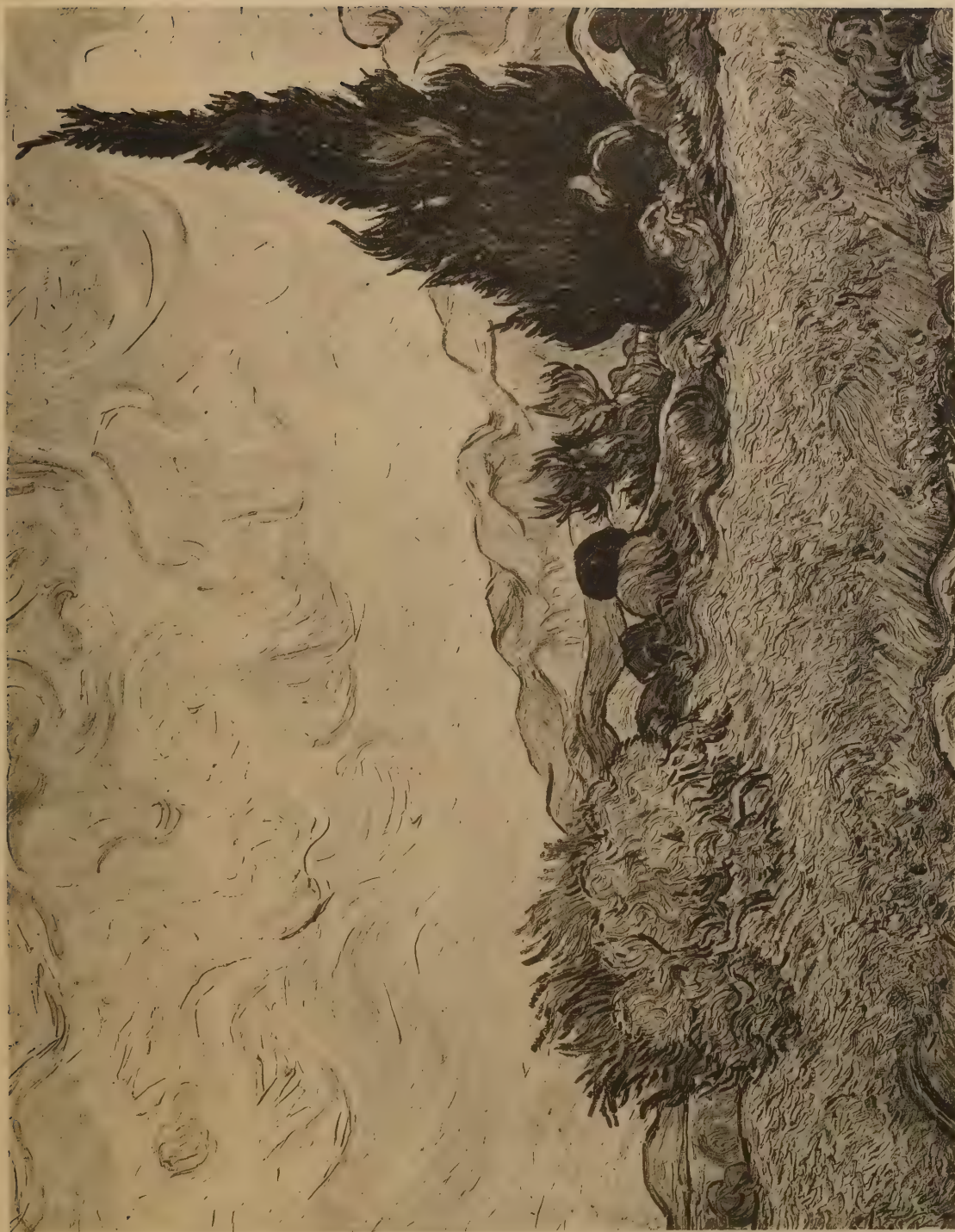
what this circle of young painters wanted ; there was something primitive and homely about it. The Dutchman transformed Parisian fashion into nobler form. Vincent simplified Paris, and the generation that was just coming into the inheritance of Manet—people like Seurat, Signac, Gauguin, and Lautrec—were looking for the very element he supplied. He got to know them all, and they were close enough to their predecessors not to break the continuity of tradition. Every one of them contributed his mite to the whole, and in so doing gained the strength and help he needed, just as the others had done before them in the seventeenth century in Holland, and earlier in Italy. Nevertheless there was some friction, how could it be otherwise ? The little *entresol* was heated, not with *chauffage central*, but with controversy. These Frenchmen had a queer way of talking about art, partly in jest and partly in silly phrases, which suddenly turned serious. They mocked at the chic and virtuosity of masters who possessed neither. Corot was ‘plain honest Corot,’ and Delacroix, whom they really respected, was the great ‘Manitou.’

Vincent soon tumbled to Manet’s novelty, and he found that Claude Monet and his friends, although they painted in the suburbs of Paris, had created an incredible new landscape. But some one in the *entresol*, about whom Vincent knew nothing, was bored to death by these landscapes, and thought Manet’s methods merely a bourgeois routine. Van Gogh disliked this mud-slinging against such men. Manet was a fencer of the good old tradition, he fought not for himself and the present generation, but for the Spaniards, and he did it with the fist of a Franz Hals. ‘Bravo!’ some one thundered from the far corner, and so loudly that it might have meant the opposite, and then he heard a perfectly ludicrous story from the same corner about boxing and fencing. The voice in the corner belonged to Gauguin, who had a head like a Red

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Indian and an enormous nose. Anquetin told a joke of Degas' about Courbet, but his joke was drowned. Only little Emile Bernard, who always talked about religious pictures, took Vincent's side. And a contemptuous voice in the far corner thundered again: 'Quality lies in your fingers!' It was the Red Indian with the enormous nose. He had a weird walking-stick with a painted mask instead of a grip, and wielding it like a spear he let it fly at Henner's '*Odalisque*,' and then, an inch before it touched the canvas, he drew it back. Vincent flinched, although he disliked Henner's picture. 'These worthies,' continued the thundering voice, 'could only think with their paws.' Lautrec made some obscene comment. 'These worthies'—and the spear flew once again at the '*Odalisque*'—'have made a manual exercise of painting to tickle the vulgar palate of the bourgeois. They are nothing but agile apes. Art has gone down the hill since Delacroix, and is dying a slow death. If the doctors were not so confoundedly clever it would have died long ago. They perform remarkable operations, cut out a piece of skin here, and graft in another piece somewhere else. Not one of them cares a tinker's curse what is under the skin. The same thing is happening to Europe.'

Van Gogh sat there and gaped, open-mouthed. Whenever he was in Gauguin's presence he felt that he must contradict him, if only because he thundered so vilely. Then suddenly his voice would become piercing as a dagger, and plunge into Vincent till he fairly writhed. Yet each time he noticed in Gauguin a profounder power of perception, almost a new instinct, and he wanted to make him a deep obeisance as though he belonged to a superior race. Gauguin noticed it—Vincent was not the only one—but the others concealed it. Sometimes Gauguin seemed like a brilliant actor who knew all the tricks of the boulevard, and then



CORNFIELD AND CYPRESSES

1888

The Brothers in Paris

suddenly shed his Parisian guise and judged like a man who saw a bird's-eye view of Paris, and could point at once to the three or four eminences that really mattered. And it so happened that Vincent had never before noticed these pinnacles, which he seemed to pass over with a word. Degas was granted an inkling of the structure of art and the forgotten glories of Gothic France, which he built up again in the limbs and faces of French cocottes. Degas and Cézanne, another constructive builder, knew what mattered. The rest were not worthy even to be mentioned by this giant from the Cambronne.

What amazed Vincent so much was his immense intellectual prowess. Gauguin would on occasion not scruple to draw his weapon against himself. Once there was a quarrel in the *entresol* about Guillaumin and Pissarro. A youth from the Ecole des Beaux-Arts was pouring contempt on the pointillism of the elder Pissarro. Gauguin, who had been Pissarro's pupil, gave the greenhorn his views on the honest craftsmanship of Pissarro compared with the cant of Bouguereau and company, with such vigour that the rest of the assembly simply heaved with laughter. Such a performance was just what Vincent adored. He liked the old Pissarro and his landscapes. Gauguin suggested, a little later, that in future Pissarro's technique would probably be included in the curriculum for girls' schools, but it was nevertheless quite beneficial to invalids, and provided a kind of antidote to the Parisian plague. Lautrec, who stood close by, looking like a dwarf beside Gauguin's bulk, amused himself by observing the perplexed countenance of Van Gogh, to whom he proceeded to recommend a dentist in Paris who filled your teeth in exchange for painted canvases. One day Lautrec told Vincent the story of Gauguin's life. First of all he had been a sailor, then he had spent eleven years in a bank and had become a cunning stockbroker. He had

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earned a lot of money and the means to support a family, and had been a proper bourgeois, like the sixty thousand other bank clerks in Paris. One day he simply threw up the bank and his comfortable income, and put on a painter's smock. Ever since the young man had starved. Vincent could not believe his ears. A bank clerk for eleven years—just fancy that! It was very odd. The dwarf suggested that, as Count of Toulouse, he himself had given up regal honours, for he might have wielded, instead of a painter's brushes, the baton of a marshal, and ridden beside the King of France, provided of course, that there was a king, and that he had learnt how to ride. Vincent did not regard Gauguin's history as a joke. In spite of all the differences he found a certain parallel between his fate and that of Gauguin. Gauguin's progress was, of course, far more important, and his sacrifices had been far more convincing, just as the rest of him, for all his Parisian *blague*, of which one might cure him, made him one of the most remarkable of men. Theo talked of the vanity of the Parisians, and said that very remarkable people could be found at every street corner. 'But not such artists!' cried Vincent. Every canvas of Gauguin was proof of his sincerity, and Huysmans was quite right in saying that he was the greatest hope of the age. Gauguin was really ahead of the Impressionists with his light-coloured landscapes, for neither nature nor his palette could mislead him, and he managed to preserve his lyrical quality. Theo smiled. His brother must always have an idol. He did not doubt Gauguin's future, but there were others whose conceit was inferior to Gauguin's, but whose work was more promising.

These landscapes of Gauguin's, painted under Pissarro's influence, exercised a tremendous fascination upon Vincent, just because of their light luminous colour which he struggled vainly to attain. All his earlier



PORTRAIT OF A YOUNG MAN IN A CAP

1888

The Brothers in Paris

work seemed heavy and over-emphasized to him. He strove to be more delicate, and tortured himself in trying to grind to powder his own powerful rhythm, which would not allow these delicate tones. In the attempt Vincent lost a good deal, he lost that simple and convincing quality and the pathos of his flower-pieces, and even his baroque style. Theo watched this process anxiously, said nothing, but needed to say nothing, because his brother could read his thoughts in his eyes. Was he to plant brussel sprouts and potatoes in the middle of the boulevard? . . . Theo thought that, as a matter of fact, he should do so, and that he had really pictured Vincent's activity rather in that way. Vincent, however, regarded such a procedure as merely misplaced affectation.

Nevertheless he knew quite well that he was losing something. His landscapes were lifeless, his colour went to pieces, and he could find spontaneous expression only at rare intervals. As soon as he left off painting landscapes all his old faculties seemed to come back to him, in fact they seemed to have grown as if they had been resting in the meantime. The obvious conclusion Vincent drew was that he must become a landscape painter at any price. One autumn evening, after an unsuccessful day spent on the banks of the Seine, he found on the dining-table, on a plate, two kippered herrings, which Theo had prepared for their supper. Vincent ran quickly into the room which he used as a studio and painted plate, herrings and all at one swoop, and it seemed as if he had suddenly been transported to Holland. The crackled yellow-gold skin turned into Dutch tones, which were placed on the canvas luminous and firm, so that the dead creatures were suddenly restored to new life. A Rembrandt in miniature! Theo was overwhelmed with wonder and amazement. Nobody could paint like that. This certainty that did not spend itself in the play of beautiful substances, and this

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almost tangible charm that was just thrown in with the whole vitality of the canvas, were qualities none of the younger generation could rival. Only a northern temperament could possess such terrific force. And Vincent painted other canvases like the fishes. Whenever his manner returned, so to speak, to Holland, his pictures simply flowed from his fingers, which proved to Vincent that Holland was worthless. Anything that seemed to come of its own accord was bound to be rubbish. He ceased to see with the vision of Van Goyen and of Ruisdael, and it would have been as difficult for him to imitate these masters as it was for him to approach more closely to the manner and the method of the Frenchmen. His studies after the nude presented even greater obstacles. He painted from models the whole winter, as long as he had enough money, and he asked everybody who came to see him for a sitting. On Sundays, when Theo tried to recover from the strain of his work and sat down to read a book, Vincent gazed at him, grumbled and mumbled till Theo took off his coat. A little later he had to strip his waistcoat, then his trousers, then his shirt, but in spite of his unceasing efforts Vincent made little progress during the winter. The palette of the Impressionists remained a dead thing in his hand. His pictures, painted with pure colours, were dirtier than the old ones with soap-green tones. His nudes were banal and even his drawing became halting. Colour impeded his work instead of giving it vitality.

Theo proceeded to put in his oar. Why should he force himself to paint in a manner alien to his nature? A year ago he had despised these Impressionists. Was there no one else on earth except them now?

No, there was no one else, except idiots and cowards, people who would remain on the bottom rung of the ladder for ever if you did not



PORTRAIT OF AN OFFICER

1888

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kick them. There always had been and there always would be animals who could live only in herds.

Theo suggested that Impressionism was perhaps only a different herd, and he pointed to Monticelli, Vincent's demi-god, who had surely cared little for the palette of the young Paris painters.

But Monticelli—what sacrilege to drag him into such a discussion!—was what he had to be. He felt at home in his closely woven texture and could express what he wanted. To demand Impressionism from Monticelli was as asinine as to call on Rembrandt for the colours of the spectrum. Of course Vincent could have painted like Monticelli, why not? Only he would have to feel as he did, he would have to acquire Monticelli's thick coat of brush-work as you would acquire a new skin. Vincent would have loved to have a crocodile-skin like that. He was familiar with every phase of Monticelli and revered this painter who was despised by the mob; this besotted drunkard who cheerfully ended his days in a gutter; he revered him as a nephew of the old besotted, drunken Rembrandt, as a close relation of his own besotted kind. No one demanded impressionism of Monticelli, but of Vincent, the plebeian of the present day. He demanded it of himself, just as he demanded honesty of himself. Monticelli's crocodile-hide would be a flimsy pretence for him, just as it would be a flimsy sham if he crawled back into his own Nuenen skin, supposing he could get over the disgust of putting it on again. The clear understanding that he was striving for was a clean palette; a dirty palette meant to him a dirty mind. He thought not only of Monticelli but of the Japanese. Did Theo know the meaning of their gay prints? Did Paris exist only for greedy collectors? Did it not also exist for the dream of gay and new prints? Paris would never be where it was if it did not cherish such longings. The simple pure air of

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Pissarro's landscapes was a necessary step towards realizing the Japanese dream. First he must learn to paint like that. He did not need to be a Gauguin to see the limits of Impressionism, which was a start, a very healthy start, but nothing more.

Theo suppressed the fact that this was Vincent's seventh start at least in the last couple of years, and that in Paris anybody could do something new every day. Vincent heard everything that Theo suppressed, and he immediately saw the dealer before his eyes. Vincent supposed that a dealer did not make very exacting demands upon an artist's conscience. In the trade it was perhaps not important.

Bitter words were exchanged occasionally. No one meant to be cruel, and the wisest plan was to take no notice, but if the other brother really took no notice, it was worse than ever. The unhappy *Odalisque* of Henner was a continual source of trouble. Theo had to leave the picture there on account of his chiefs, who admired Henner, and Theo had to suffer much at their hands, because they wanted rows of Henners instead of pictures by these ruffians who puffed their smelly tobacco into the *entresol* every afternoon. Vincent saw a personal insult in this picture by Henner. Lautrec cracked jokes about it. Gauguin thundered and hurled his spear at it. Late one night, after Theo and Vincent had passed a tolerable evening, Vincent rushed into his brother's bedroom. 'Theo, take down that Henner!' Theo had the patience of an angel. 'All right, Vincent, I'll take him down!' 'To-morrow?' 'I can't to-morrow, because I've got a customer coming to see him.' 'A customer for Henner? What an ass the man must be! Theo, you mean to say you let any one buy a picture like that?' 'I can't get rid of it any other way. I can't resign my job, because I——' 'Yes, you can—in fact, it's so disgusting that you ought to.' 'Then we would have nothing to eat.'

The Brothers in Paris

‘Does that mean that you want to reproach me with living on your money? Yes, be straight, that’s what you really want to say!’ ‘No, Vincent, I don’t. I only wish you would realize——’ ‘I know, business!’

Sometimes Theo lost his patience. Henner was by no means the worst of them. Was he any worse than Ziem, whom Vincent valued so highly? Lautrec simply held his sides with laughter at Vincent’s admirations. Ziem! the fellow with strawberries and cream! Vincent was wild. You might as well call Renoir a goody-goody. His palette was not at all the point. Ziem had fought for Delacroix when those present were still in long clothes, and you could accuse Delacroix of all kinds of similar oddities. Somebody announced that Van Gogh was going to write an article for the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* about the inner life of Monsieur Ziem, and Lautrec stood in front of the Henner and declared that the nymph had a striking resemblance to a niece of his, a countess, and that he would undoubtedly have to proceed against the villain for defamation of his family.

This wretched Henner cropped up again and again all through the winter, even after it had been sold. And then there were other Henners, and the managers of the Gallery found the sale of Theo’s pet pictures insufficiently lucrative. Vincent had an unfortunate habit of stewing over a subject, which he would throw into your face on the slightest provocation. If Theo attempted the meekest protest, Vincent immediately threatened complete rupture. The winter was always Vincent’s worst time, because he could not let off steam in the open air and had to swallow his temper, which was very indigestible. The two brothers often sat opposite to one another in complete silence. Sometimes Theo would really have been glad if Vincent had taken rooms somewhere else, but he said nothing, and suffered all. It is questionable whether his

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silence sprang from fear of his stronger brother, or from patience. At other times, without any reason, Vincent was suddenly a different man. He would go and fetch flowers, although they were dear in winter. Then he would run all the way to the place where he could get the particular Dutch brew which Theo loved to drink.

‘Theo, I know I am horrid. I torture the only man who is good to me, but I am like that, I can’t help it. What you think you see in me really does not exist, and I often think that my inner nature is vulgar. But perhaps my nature tortures me as much as it tortures you, possibly even more—and possibly there is something besides my rottenness in me which may some day gain the upper hand. I don’t know, but it may.’

As soon as the winter was over he started his landscapes again. He painted a great deal in Asnières with Bernard, who lived there with his parents. His determination succeeded in making his pictures a little lighter. Nobody helped him, but it may have been good for him that Gauguin had left Paris for the Antilles. Vincent seemed on the way to becoming a real Parisian painter, and of course one of the most modern kind. It was the spring of the Neo-Impressionists. Seurat had exhibited his *Grande Jatte*, and Signac was showing his first important canvases. Both of them had a number of adherents, and the barely concealed accession of the elder Pissarro into the New Group added greatly to its prestige. To the horror of Messieurs Goupil, Theo exhibited these pictures. He gathered together in the *entresol* the simple seascapes of Seurat which made the *gens du boulevard* laugh, the more powerful canvases of Pissarro in which one could still see reminiscences of Monet, and the symphonies of Signac, which made most people scream. Vincent spent whole nights with Seurat. His every instinct really revolted against the new creed, which was quite clear, logical, practicable and



STILL LIFE

1888

The Brothers in Paris

all the rest, but as opposed to the soul of a Rembrandt or a Millet as anything could be. It was all very well to be a craftsman, but to reduce all painting to a rule-of-thumb was surely stuff and nonsense.

Seurat bowled him over with his simplicity. He was not concerned with great deeds, nor was he a genius. No single act, not even that of a genius, could counterbalance the frightful waste of energy of our times. Was there ever a greater artist or a nobler mind than Delacroix? He had realized the fate destined for our culture, and he had staked everything, not to achieve personal distinction, but a general language, an art in which others might share, without making it common. What had happened to his efforts? Museum pieces for rich people, and painted stocks and shares; that's what they had become. When they were painted, the whole boulevard passed them by. Not even ten Delacroix could check the interminable stream of sycophants who outraged even the innermost shrine. One folly succeeded another, and the more painters there were the more misunderstanding and paradox was put into the world. Was there a happier creature than Renoir? But who shared his bliss? Did even Renoir's extraordinary productive wealth raise the level of contemporary art by a hair's-breadth? But Renoir and Delacroix thought of the community, and they were equally remarkable as social pioneers and as artists, while the rest hankered only after their own glory, and were unintelligible even to the few experts.

A spark and Vincent was aflame! All that Seurat told him was merely the articulation of what had struggled for expression in his soul. In the Mauve period he had suggested something of the kind to his master, who rejected it as rubbish. Even simple spokesmen like Delacroix and Renoir were too complex for the masses. Perhaps others would be as great—Gauguin and Cézanne. But would they and their work help the

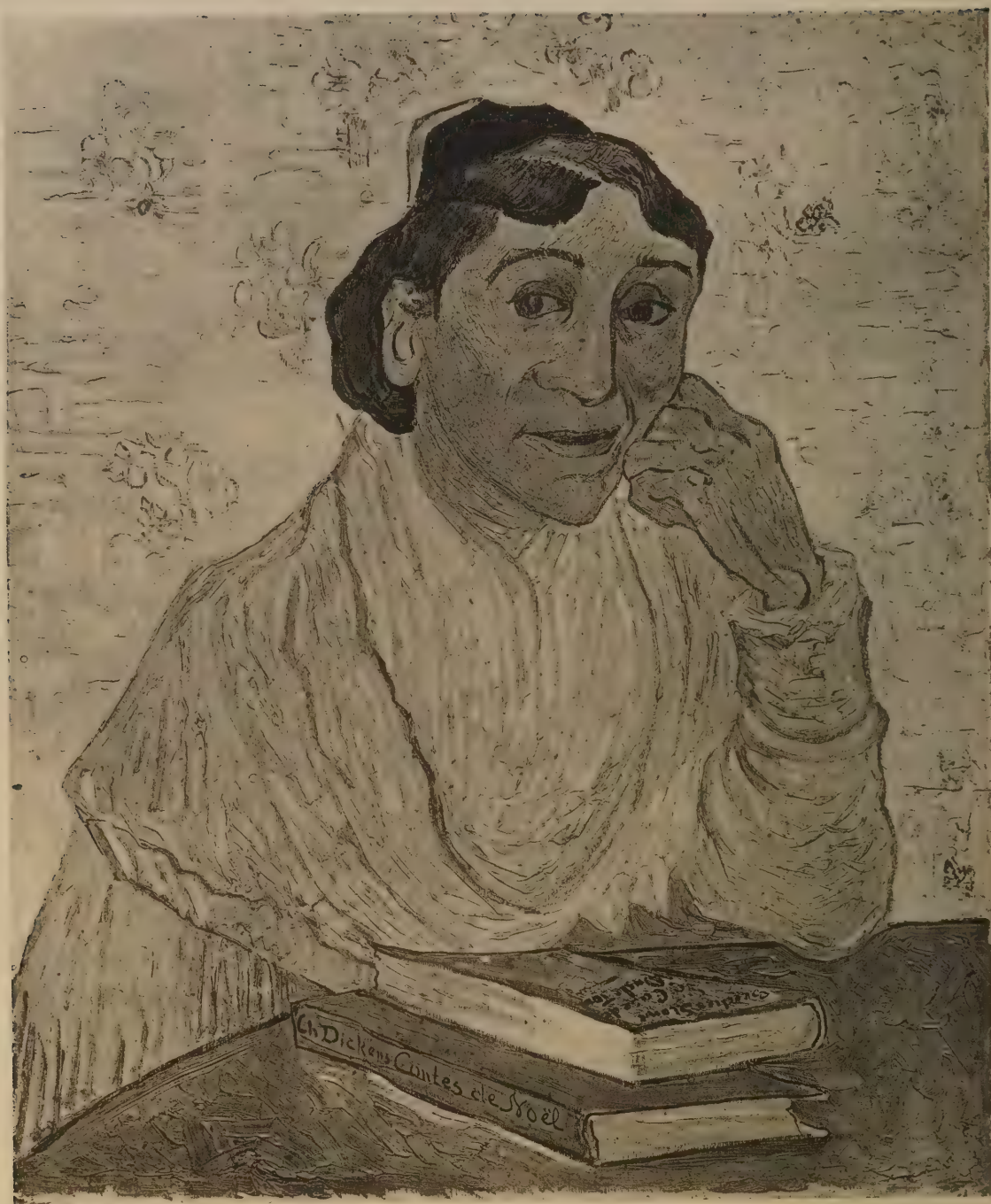
Vincent van Gogh

people, art, or the world? They came and went, left large passages in art books behind them, and their work was so much cash-value on the shelves of the dealers or the walls of the snobs. The world remained ugly, and became uglier every day. Had it ever occurred to Vincent that one hundred picked works of modern art could not produce one single specimen of harmonious architecture, and that not one artist could be found to create anything of use to mankind. Art was a holiday, and what was more, a holiday for the people who had no week days at all; for people who did a decent day's work, especially for the best of them, art was an unattainable luxury.

Vincent stared. He confessed it had never occurred to him. Slowly Vincent's eyes perceived the graceful image of a benignant Muse—a brother of working-men, a friend of beggars and of prostitutes, an out-cast and an anarchist. Vincent did not blush before the gentle gaze of this goddess, and her all too human simplicity had for him the dignity of honour. Was not a similar quality in Rembrandt and in Millet the real secret of their greatness? And Vincent was the man Seurat wanted to liberate from the fetters of idealism and pledge to the production of useful objects! It was possible to feel all kinds of sympathy with mankind, in fact this sympathy was the real motive power of creative art, even the great destroyers had acted under a similar belief. Not the motive but its expression had to take on a more social form.

Vincent confessed his shame, because he had never considered these problems. Once more he looked into the abyss of his soul. How had he spent his life? Where had he passed it away? He felt himself face to face with a man before whom he was as dust.

Vincent's modesty seemed to Seurat to hold open the gate through which they could escape to freedom. There was to be no simulated



PORTRAIT D'UNE ARLESIENNE

1888

The Brothers in Paris

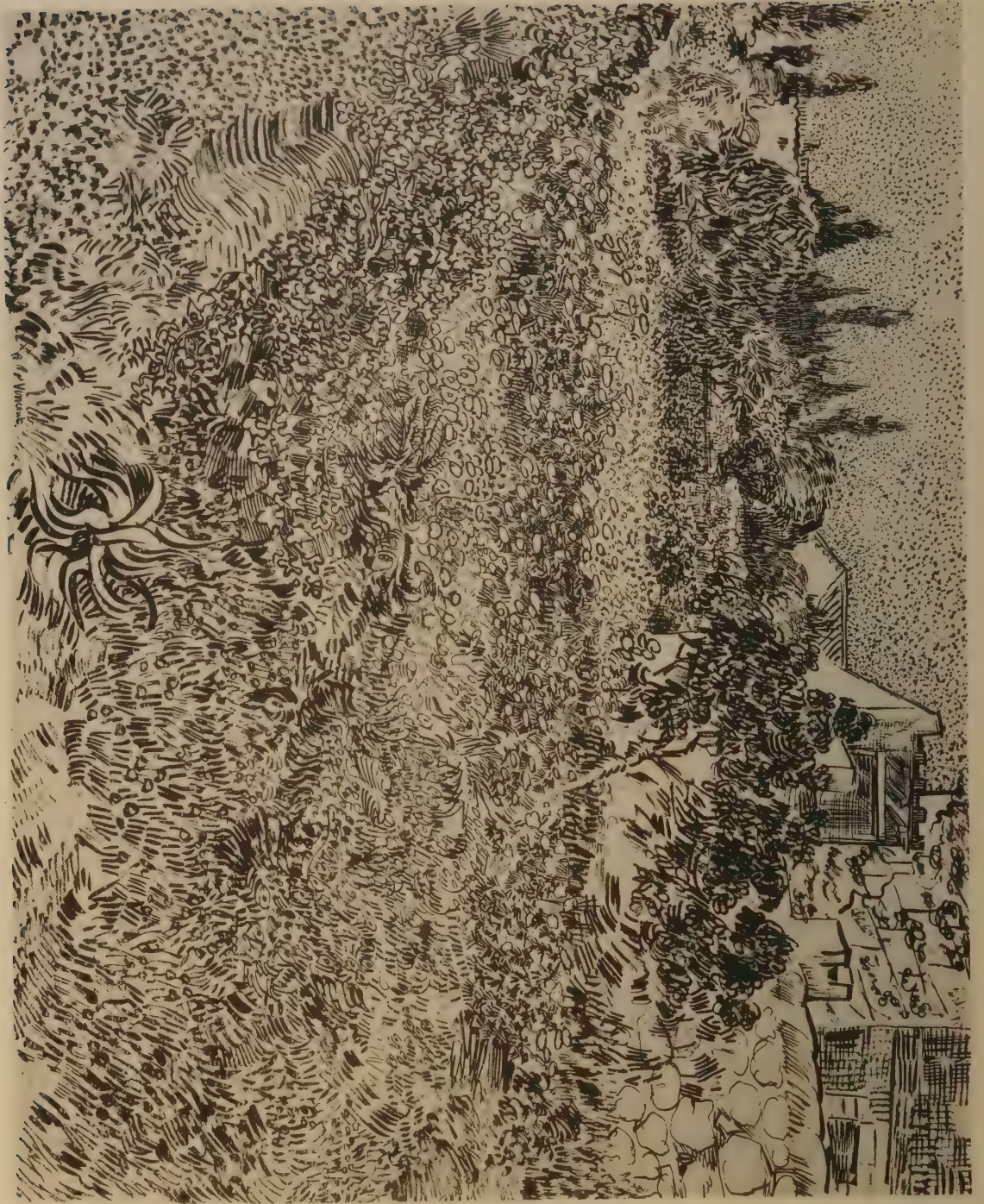
simplicity. Nothing could be more offensive to Seurat than a heroic pose, and he detested anything that savoured of archaism like the plague. Vincent and Seurat were soon in perfect agreement. The communism they aspired to must of course be limited by the extent of natural possibilities. The individual, or psychic element of creative invention, for example, was to remain a personal affair. What they aimed at was a form, a style like that of Gothic art. Vincent was transported with delight. But such a style demanded a profound faith, or, if not faith, an equally profound scepticism. Seurat regarded the faith of the Gothic period as ultimately nothing but the externalization of the social cohesion of the era, of which religious faith formed but a part. But was there a general tendency strong enough to create a common style of expression? If you were modest enough, you might perhaps find one. The aims of the idealists were dismissed offhand, and only demonstrably sound convictions entered the sphere of their calculations. The new divinity was not God, but causation; no one doubted that twice two are four, and they attached some weight to chemistry and physics. The danger of being too scientific was not as great as the imminent chaos which faced the world, in fact it ceased to be dangerous altogether as soon as science was accepted as the frame and not the content of life. Since colour was the natural medium of modern painters, they formulated laws of colour. The discoveries of Constable and Delacroix gave them a full warrant for their procedure. The optic sciences, led by Chevreul, had already established laws governing the choice, arrangement, division and gradation of colours. So far these phenomena had been ascribed to the realm of subjective appearances, from which they must now be extricated. The linear structure of a picture could also be subjected to rational laws. The greater the number of regulations a

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painter had to observe, the more complete would be the abstraction of his picture. Were these rational laws a heavier burden upon artists than the regulations of the Mediæval Guilds or the Canons of the Church? If an artist's vision collapsed under the burden, his vision was probably not worth preserving. And if perhaps some really valuable creative conception was strangled by the new gospel, it would, at any rate, be better for the few to suffer than the many, and the world's burden would no doubt be lightened. The expansion of such a progressive school of painting might reasonably lead to the production of frescoes, and be the first signs of a general democratic style.

The new gospel seemed fairly convincing, but Vincent was more convinced by the general attitude of Seurat's mind than by his specific arguments, and even more by his uprightness. The situation was not quite so simple with Signac. Signac rejected everybody who disagreed with him in any particular, without further ado, and his intolerance formed an obstacle for Vincent, although he had more sympathy with Signac's craftsmanlike manner than with the slightly classical element in Seurat's art.

Thus he became a Neo-Impressionist, at any rate in theory. Vincent failed to grasp Seurat's final aim, which was to liberate pictorial art from the confines of frames, and to substitute for the easel, walls. How could Vincent, without a home, dream of interior decoration? Later, far away from Seurat, this possibility became a practical experience. All that Vincent understood was the common-sense element in the new method and the honesty of its inventor. He began to *pointiller*, which was a bitter business for him. His hand slipped all too easily in obedience to his better instincts, and he lost the balance of his painfully constructed surface. Before he knew what had happened he found himself using a



A GARDEN
QUILL DRAWING 1883

The Brothers in Paris

colour that was not purely chromatic. He had to confess, gnashing his teeth meanwhile, that his ego refused to submit to the rules of the craft. He failed to achieve the brilliance of Signac's surfaces, and still more the quiet structure of Seurat's work. Nevertheless he managed to paint a number of landscapes which conformed more or less to the new canon. They were lukewarm Van Goghs, not without charm, but lacking all real substance. Theo compared Vincent's efforts, though he did not say so, to the attempts of a man who tries to speak without words. The two brothers did not talk much about Vincent's latest passion, but when others were present Vincent would sometimes break out into glowing praise of Seurat, and enlarge on the merits of the new theory without substantiating his arguments. He disliked the name of the new movement, invented by Signac, because it seemed too pretentious. He belonged to the Impressionists *du petit boulevard*. Pissarro, Monet, Sisley were the Impressionists *du grand boulevard*. Seurat of course stood above all coteries. To Vincent's mind he combined the craftsmanship of an old mosaic-worker with the intelligence of a man of to-day. Seurat was the child of Classic Ages. Vincent was awe-struck, for Seurat had seen the Greeks.

There was an oddity in Vincent's reference to the Greeks. He thought it rather absurd himself, and his speech became confounded when he had to refer to the subject. Lautrec called Seurat the 'Giotto du petit boulevard,' and he compared Vincent to Orcagna. Signac, who detested unprofessional discussions, declared that Vincent had nothing whatever to do with Seurat and that he had better stick to his Dutch peasants. It would be easier to make a cat into a race-horse than Vincent into a Neo-Impressionist.

And he was right. There was something in Vincent that nodded

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agreement to Signac's rather brutal rejection of him. But Mauve and so many others had tried to stop his progress, and he had succeeded after all. Anyhow, he would not give in. He continued to divide his canvas into little points; he divided his very existence into spots, which lacked all luminosity, and he railed against the opposition of his nature, which really saved him. He refused all compromise, but occasionally, beneath his network of dots, could not help seeing a design which no amount of system could altogether blot out. As soon as he relaxed his efforts his own forms glided to the surface, and the little dots danced like water on a sheet of glowing metal. Theo met him once, on just such an occasion, somewhere near the Seine, and he snatched the picture from Vincent. It was a hundred times better than all the 'Neos' put together.

It was a landscape. Vincent saw a kind of coarse Monet in it, whereas he wanted to produce a Signac. Theo saw the similarity to Monet, but what Vincent thought coarse was rather an enlargement of Monet's horizon. The whole picture shone like the sun at dawn; the landscape was divided only to grow together again as a luminous whole, more compact than the original which had inspired him. The technique employed was subject to no rules laid down by the painter before beginning his canvas. The whole was the answer to the demand of an instant, and consisted of dots and lines, as speech consists of various sounds.

Theo's approval was encouraging, although of course isolated praise, especially from a brother, was not worth a great deal. None the less he returned to his old methods, although he desired the opposite, and in his drawings, the beginner of Nuenen could be identified with ease.

'Thank the Lord,' said Theo. Now Parisian culture had been added to the solidity of the man from Nuenen. Above all, Vincent's personality was in his work. Hitherto he had been hampered by his old rags,

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but suddenly he had liberated himself from all encumbrances. His new colour was not assumed, but the expression of his nature.

It was a curious fact that Vincent's development came about in direct opposition to his own will, while men like Seurat literally painted with their will-power. Therefore Seurat was bound to be right, and if Vincent produced a landscape that had luminosity, colour and composition—then it was chance. Vincent was convinced that efforts such as his could never produce a new Paris or a new Delacroix. Once you knew how painting should be done and failed to do it, as he did, you were merely vulgar. Such vulgarity would bring its own revenge. Every step forward in one direction was sure to be retrogressive in another, and he detested the idea of being a slave to his senses.

He tried to struggle with the new system again and again. He made himself persevere with his dots, and then the last five minutes generally sufficed to ruin the whole system and to save the picture. When the winter came he was painting portraits, and portraits always broke down his determination. He just let his brushes rip. One day, when he was with Emile Bernard, he painted at one sitting the Père Tanguy, who sold him his colours. His brushwork was as clear-cut as sword-thrusts; he surrounded old Tanguy's rough face with an even rougher kind of Japanese wall-paper, covered with masks, because Père Tanguy also sold him Japanese prints. Tanguy was no fool, and kept the picture, so Vincent painted him again at home, even lighter, even more Japanese—what Vincent thought Japanese—even flatter and bolder, though he wanted to be particularly careful the second time. In the same way he painted the street where they lived, and one day in a slightly tired, almost happy mood, he painted the table with the French books on it. It was a still-life, more profoundly organized even than his juicy flower-pieces,

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and betrayed a finer mental activity, more like the spirit of good French prose. He painted his friends, every one who wanted to be painted, and most often of all he painted himself, but his portraits were not always as happy as the one of Père Tanguy. Occasionally the ghosts of Nuenen appeared and spoiled his Japanese manner. Sometimes dark tones made their way into his palette; sometimes, worse still, his lightness became too thin, and Vincent wandered in the dark with his brush, like a blind man with his staff. Theo suffered agonies at such times. Van Gogh was never completely an artist, even in his own consciousness, and he lacked every form of pretension, but his nerves lagged behind his sensibility. Art alone could keep them poised, for art was for Vincent the only means of resolving the tension his mind and soul experienced. This tension increased. The more he struggled with any particular method, the more explosive were his pictures—at any rate, the best of them. Seurat, Signac and the others, with their theories, and even his own thoughts, had the same effect on him as ropes on a balloon; they must be cut before the balloon can rise. The whole of Paris, everything he saw and experienced there exercised the same influence on him. Theo was well aware that the balloon was getting fuller and fuller—almost to bursting point; he saw how this tension tortured the man, though it was the greatest blessing to the artist. This was what forced the brush into Vincent's hand, and not his model or the river in the landscape. The objects he painted did not always exhaust the explosive forces he brought to his task, so he found other outlets. He said what he ought to have painted, and what could not be put into words. Theo did not always make sufficient allowance for this latent force, which multiplied its violence, if met with the slightest opposition. This characteristic repelled many, with the unfortunate result for Theo that



MONT MAJOUR
QUILL DRAWING AND WATER-COLOUR 1888

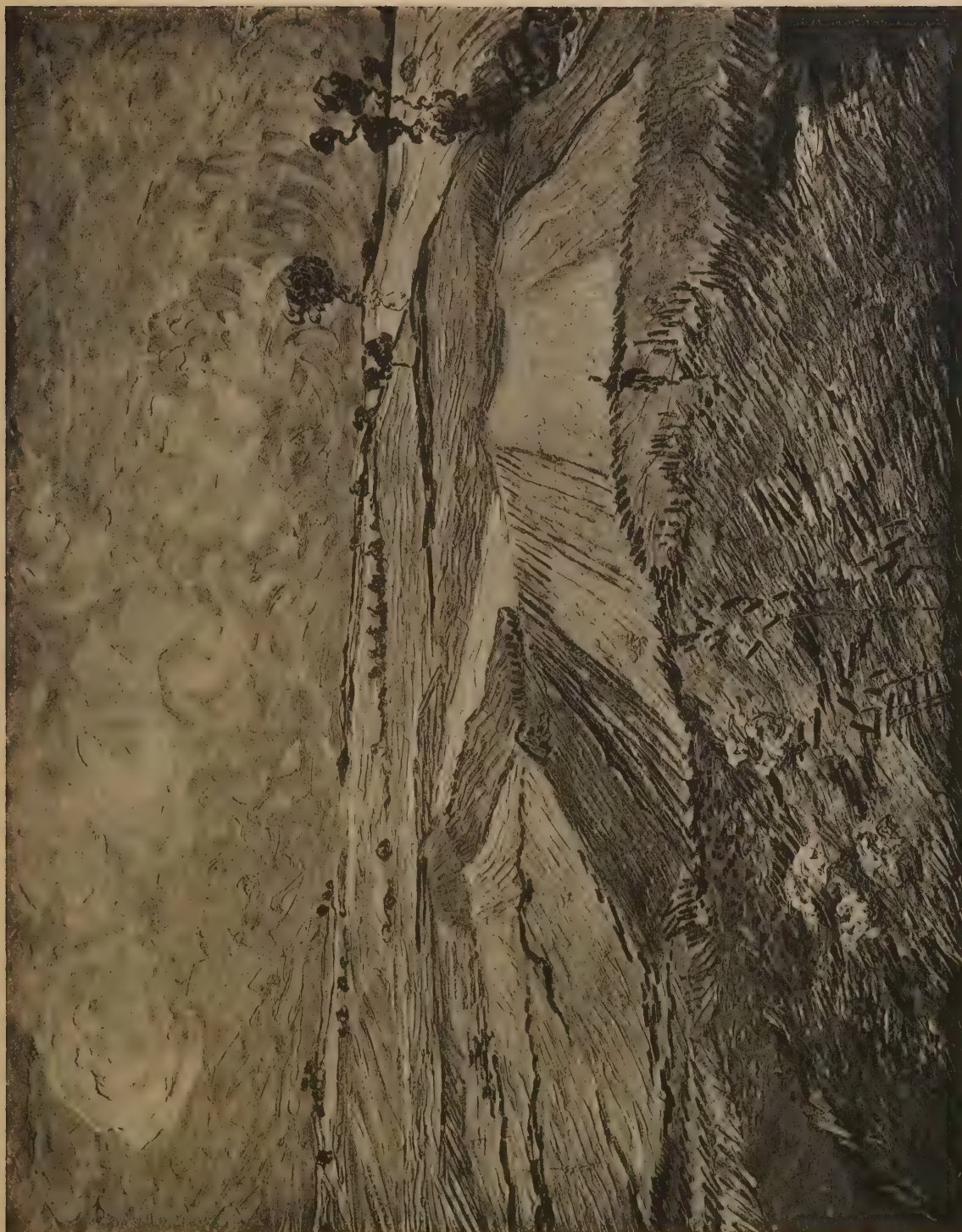
The Brothers in Paris

the circle of his intimate friends was broken. His business of course brought a certain amount of intercourse in its train, for material interests tied the artists to his *entresol*, but when Vincent started, one by one they slipped away, and outside their comment was: 'Quel rasoir!' Vincent continued to hold forth, and noticed so little of the change in the general attitude towards him, that in the winter of 1887 he believed he had made considerable progress with his scheme for founding a community of artists, which of course depended first of all on the good will of the artists towards himself and each other. Vincent's best side was hidden more and more from every one except little Emile Bernard, who, being the youngest among them, was more tolerant of Vincent's mannerisms. Bernard got excited about some rival of his. Vincent calmed him by pointing out what immeasurable bliss it was to be a painter at all. Vincent simply leaped over his little friend's miseries, and in the process tore himself away from his own. He would admit that you worried yourself to death for a hundred days on end, but then came one day which wiped out the memory of all the others. Perhaps being a painter did not mean much, still less how you painted, Impressionism or Neo-Impressionism. But it was marvellous that in this evil world there were still people who thought of God, although they were foul-mouthed, and went to brothels, and swallowed alcohol in buckets. They fought on God's side none the less, were reviled for His sake, praised Him with their coloured splodges, with curious hieroglyphics, with dirty lips, and miserable habits—all for God and only for God! They were all the same at bottom; Delacroix the cold man of the world, Manet the dandy, Monticelli the drunkard. Millet was not alone in his piety, Lautrec and Gauguin were not less so. Gauguin was a painter of saints, pure and simple, and he went to the colonies so

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that he should not be made ashamed. Where was God in Paris if not among the artists? And as there were not many of them, the only hope was for the artists to stick together in the fearful mass of Godless wretches.

Theo was roped in. Theo made millions for Messieurs Goupil et Cie, Theo with his kindness and his vision, Theo the most important man in Paris, more important than all the Vincents, spent his life in money-grubbing, and for others at that. Why? Did he want to be a capitalist? A man with such a kind heart and such a vision? Never! Why did he not bid a polite farewell to the Gallery and start something himself? Not a beastly shop, but a glorious undertaking for a community, for the sake of art and all good artists, and for the sake of mankind. The scheme was highly practicable, simplicity itself, and bound to succeed. He dreamed of a community of independent painters, based on a common idea, a common need, and a common hope. All Theo's friends would join in a modest start. He would choose the right people, choose their best work, and run a co-operative business. The undertaking, not the individual, but the undertaking as a whole traded. The receipts would be given, not to the painter of the picture, but to the community, from whom every member would obtain money, bread, wine, colours and canvas. Theo was to run the business, for every one trusted him. He would cease to be a tradesman, and be the father and patriarch of the community. For the first year or so there would be difficulties, then the undertaking would gradually make itself felt. People like the Père Pissaro would join too. Of course he would have to get more than a young *copin* without a family. These details did not require discussion, for Theo would do the fair thing. The undertaking would become famous. They would then go to the provinces, to the country bourgeoisie,



THE PLAIN OF ARLES

1888

The Brothers in Paris

and also to the peasants; then abroad to Holland, where a few young spirits were sure to support them, and then on to Belgium and Germany. The proper way to do it of course would be to take a caravan round everywhere, and just put up an exhibition like a circus. Then the undertaking would go farther afield, across the water to England and America. The rich people would roll up, for they would by then have heard something about it, and the community would be famous; then it would hail dollars. Once that happened they could travel about with ten caravans, with a hundred even, and found branches like Goupil et Cie, and thus serve God everywhere.

Theo felt like Sancho Panza who had to act on his master's fancies. He loathed his business life, and longed as much as Vincent to do other things, and sometimes he even believed in the possibility of new schemes. Pensive and cautious as Theo was, he suddenly became enamoured of Vincent's dream, and made wild plans for the new community in the course of excited evenings. Why should a co-operation of artists not succeed, as soon as you were convinced of the reliability and capacity of your members? Naturally the undertaking could not be put into practice as easily as Vincent imagined; it would require capital to begin with, and the overhead charges alone would probably amount to quite a considerable sum.

Overhead charges meant nothing to Vincent, and work and canvases were capital as well as money. He was prepared to begin still more modestly, by exchanging his own pictures for those of others, in order to acquire a stock. That could all be done on the quiet, without letting anybody notice it. He would swop with Signac, Seurat, Gauguin. Masterpieces by Monticelli could be bought for twenty francs, and he could also swop with Pissarro. Even the future members were to be

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told nothing, otherwise they were sure to let the cat out of the bag. And once they had got about a hundred pictures, they would have enough capital for quite a flourishing community; the cash expenditure involved would be almost negligible.

On the morrow Theo saw everything in a colder light, and he slunk to his shop with the feeling of having betrayed his employer and Vincent alike. Vincent sat at home, empty like a pricked balloon, staring into the rain, his head full of the wine of the night before, unable to work. Perhaps it was all nonsense. Was there really a link between people of such different temperaments? Lautrec, Gauguin and the others—he thought of their jokes. They were always cracking jokes. Were they really thinking about God when they fooled like that? . . . The rain rattled against the window pane.

And so time passed by. Every one had his work and his worry, and a thousand incidents intervened which did not improve matters. As everybody was trying to exhibit, Vincent went to the Père Tanguy with Lautrec and Bernard, gave him what he wanted, and the pictures were hung up in the Café Tambourin in the Avenue Clichy. If only he could sell something so that he could hope at any rate to pay for the expenses of his colours and his canvas. All the others sold something. Lautrec's takings were enough to live on. Even Bernard got rid of a canvas now and again. Vincent alone sold nothing. He had placed his hopes in the Café Tambourin, because the lady at the cash-desk liked him, or pretended to. Theo warned him. The affair ended in the bankruptcy of the café, and he lost not only his pictures but even the frames.

In the light of such experiences it was not always easy to make plans for the future. The brothers met at night, and neither dared to open his mouth. Theo waited, Vincent waited. With great efforts they set the



LA BERCEUSE

1888

The Brothers in Paris

creaking apparatus of their enthusiasm in motion once again. It was easier when the lamp was lit, and especially if there was anything to drink. You had to get a bit drunk sometimes. Theo thought they must remember two difficulties; first, that the new community would have very few attractions for the public; secondly, that it would have immense attractions for all starving painters. The future would be better? Pissarro had hoped for thirty years. Monticelli had hoped himself into the gutter.

Vincent realized quite clearly that if he failed to rouse his brother from his present scepticism, the whole scheme would be buried in the limbo of forgotten ideas. As to the public, the public had been the same for the last thousand years, they had not changed since the days of Christ. Did Christ mind the public? Were they to wait until the public invited the artists to form a community, whose object was to screw the neck of the public till they could not even invite each other to tea? Sometimes he vowed he would not say anything more, but he continued to talk from habit, and because of the drink on the table. He lived in his dream, like a snail in its shell, and the place reeked of alcohol. His brother allowed himself to be convinced, also from habit. Others, too, could be convinced, if they were tackled properly—until the next morning.

Suddenly he gave it up. One evening when Theo instead of Vincent, happened to be optimistic, he declared that he did not care about his scheme any more, and he pushed the bottle away. Why? No definite reason, just because he was tired of the whole affair. He was tired of his shell, he was tired of being in a place where you could keep warm only so long as you stayed at home. He wanted to go away, far away from everybody's theories and jokes, from their drivel and from this town!

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What was the cause of his brother's weakness? Paris might be better than The Hague and Amsterdam, and every other city in the world. For this very reason, Paris was all the more dangerous, because it absorbed the component individualities, which made its strength. The stronger the town, the weaker its inhabitants. Everybody swaggered about the *entresol*, rode a high horse, cursed and swore and railed at God and the world. Once they were in the street, they became pedestrians who ran to catch the bus. Everybody here could make a revolution, but nobody could build up anything out of it. Paris swallowed all power of action. It was due to money, which was more important there than elsewhere, and even more to something intangible, the asphalt or the air.

At last the peasant broke through. Strange that he had been silent for so long, but his yearning for the open was the more acute. Suddenly Vincent came to the conclusion that he could not endure Paris for another day. Where he went did not matter, as long as it was in the open, in the country among peasants. He would go anywhere except to Holland. He felt no longing whatsoever to return home. He had no home. He might find a home much more easily in this crazy town, or at any rate, a substitute, but as he did not want a substitute it hardly mattered where he went. He wanted to be left alone, alone with his Maker. Consequently he would live wherever it was most convenient, preferably in the south, where it was warm. The chill of this ocean of houses, where you only kept warm with alcohol, had nearly driven him crazy. Perhaps he could go to Marseilles, where Monticelli had lived. Bread was cheap and there was plenty of sunshine. Perhaps it would be easier to found his community there than in Paris. The south would make it easier for people to understand and share in the longing of the modern painters. Was there anything more absurd than this cult of

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sunshine in a town where the sun never shone? The allowance Theo had given him in Holland would be sufficient for Marseilles, and probably he could live there more comfortably.

Theo agreed to everything without being asked. There was no other solution, and all that mattered now was that this solution should be carried through as well as possible. It touched Theo very closely. He had often longed for his former mode of life, especially during the first winter he spent with his brother in Paris, when Vincent was so unbearable. What had hitherto been a perfectly legitimate excuse for a separation from his brother now suddenly assumed the aspect of burdens shared equally in the joint attempt to scale some height. Had they reached the summit, and if they had, could they stay there? Vincent would reach the top undoubtedly. The progress he had made since the Nuenen days was staggering. In less than two years Vincent the Dutchman had become a European. And where was Theo all the while? . . . After all, what had annoyed him was really nothing but the progression of Vincent's development. The restlessness of creative activity prevented Vincent from leading a humdrum companionable existence. It was trying at times, of course, but it meant that you were sharing in his progress. If he lost the ability to share in his brother's life, he would have nothing left but a weary routine. He did not want that, he would rather be an adventurer, though he had not the least talent for such a career. He saw, clearer than ever, his way to founding Vincent's community of painters. Vincent decided that if his brother really felt like that, he would probably translate their dreams into reality. While he founded a colony in the south, Theo could conquer England. There were Dutch art-dealers in London, old acquaintances with whom he could collaborate, Van Wisselingh, for instance. The

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public in Antwerp and in Brussels were already beginning to take an interest and to buy a few pictures. If Theo arrived in England with fifty well-chosen canvases he was bound to succeed. Even Theo thought it possible—in fact, probable. He became voluble on the subject, he could sell pictures all right if he was in the right mood, and had the right stuff to sell, especially if Goupil et Cie were not standing at his elbow. He could have sold a hundred times as many pictures in a different *entresol*. Why should he not make the attempt at once? Theo suddenly wondered why they were to part at the very moment when they saw everything eye to eye. At any rate Vincent's flight from Paris need not be permanent. An absence of a few weeks, as he insisted on seeing the south, but no more, and then they would join forces again.

Vincent was firm. Whatever Theo did in Paris was ten times as important as anything he or any one else could do in the south, but he had to go. His blood froze in these streets. He had once found something in Paris—it was lovely, it was wildly beautiful—but he could only reach fuller expression in solitude. Perhaps he was filled to overflowing with the beauty he had seen and experienced, but he must be alone once more in Nature. Possibly he was wrong in going south, but he could not find out without going. He had visions of a different landscape, different from the Parisian landscapes as were his thoughts from the thoughts of the Parisians. Monet was splendid, Pissarro was splendid, and he could never do as well as they had done, but perhaps there was something in Nature, even more real, something that was perhaps too simple, too easy for these masters, but it lured him on. 'Theo, I must start all over again, I must go down into the earth, naked, once more—only for three or four years, that's all I have, but one more effort I must make. Somewhere beneath an open sky I must find it at last.

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THE NIGHT CAFÉ

1888

The Brothers in Paris

There is wind down there which I long for. I must feel it on my skin. In Paris I have lost my sense for the wind altogether, in fact I am losing my very skin by degrees.'

They agreed to choose, not Marseilles, but Arles. A friend had told wonderful stories of the Plain near Arles. Moreover living was cheaper there than in Marseilles, and he could get good peasant models. Peasants were the only possible people.

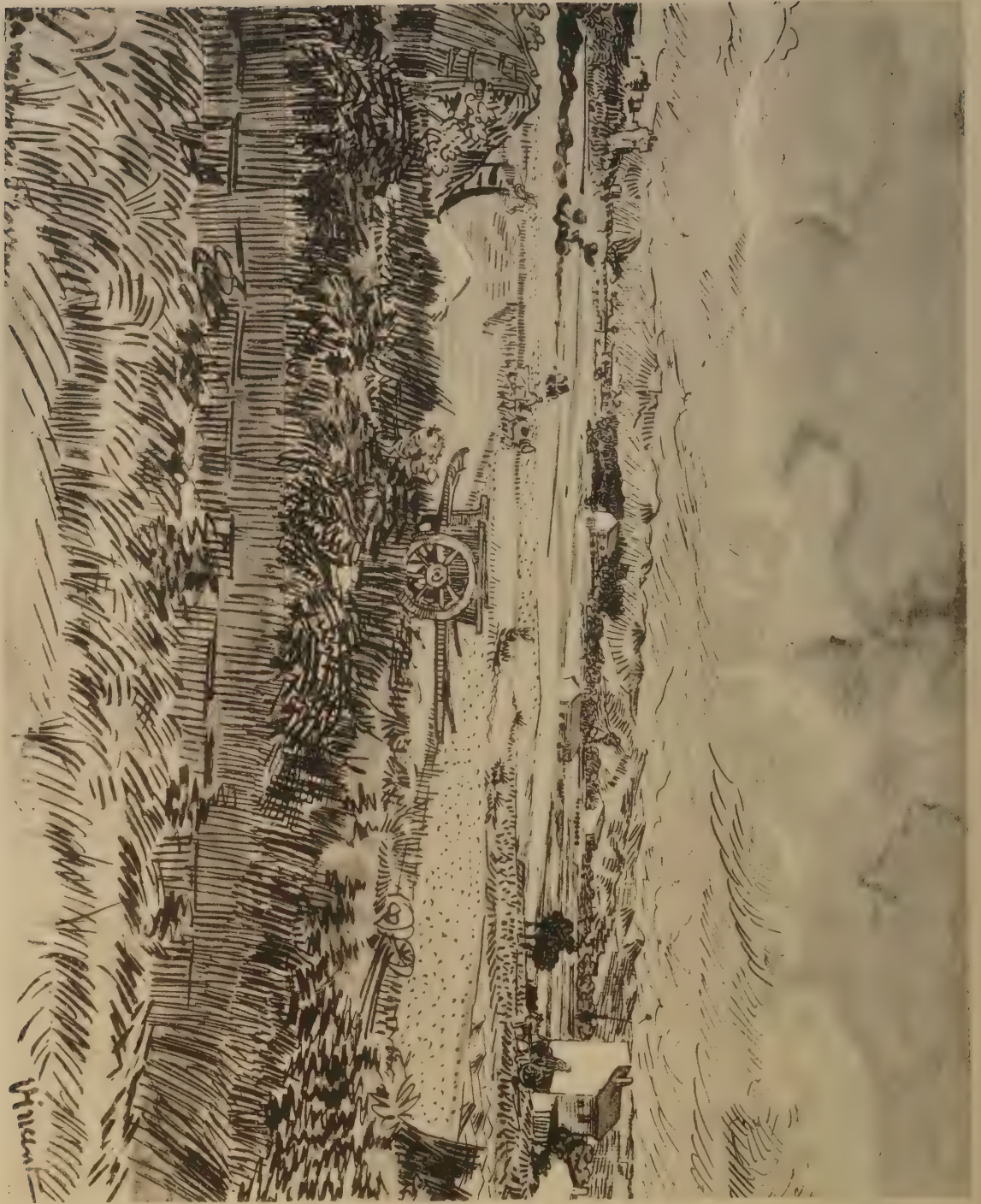
His brother nodded sadly. Vincent decorated their rooms on the last day while Theo was at the Gallery. He scrubbed and polished and tidied everything for the first time in his life. He pulled out his rolled-up canvases from beneath his bed, flattened them out and nailed them up on the walls, so that Theo could still feel his brother's presence about him. Then he fetched flowers and put them in the middle of the table. They seemed pale by the side of the painted flowers which looked down on the deserted Theo with their great soft eyes.



SUNFLOWERS

1888

Chapter V
Happiness in Arles



THE BLUE CART
QUILL DRAWING, WATER-COLOUR AND PASTEL 1888

Chapter V

Happiness in Arles

VINCENT arrived in Arles on February the 26th 1888. It was cold, and snow covered the streets. The plain and the mountains were wrapt in a white shroud, and only occasionally the wet blackness of curiously shaped trees could be seen. The inhabitants were queer, large-limbed creatures. Everything seemed very strange, but the atmosphere of Paris still clung to Vincent. He sent Theo the draft for a letter to Teersteege, the obstreperous partner of Goupil in The Hague. It was a most important document for the campaign in England. Teersteege, if he wanted, could open his doors to all the Impressionists, but of course he would only take those *du grand boulevard*. Somehow he had to be treated in such a way that he would have to approach the *grand boulevard* through the *petit boulevard*. Should he, however, fail to evince the necessary degree of attention, or even permit himself to be insulting by refusing to answer—which seemed quite probable—then one could play him a trick against which no defence was possible. Mauve, Teersteege's most intimate friend, had recently died. How would it be to send his widow a picture by Vincent in the name of the new community, mind, in the name of the new community! Mauve presumably was worthy of the presentation of a picture. In addition, a letter might be written, without a word against Teersteege in it, but between the lines it should appear that it was rather surprising to be ignored by him. Anybody who could not recognize the renaissance of painting was obviously blind. Or something to that effect should be put into the accompanying

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letter. Perhaps one might go so far as to suggest, quite casually, that his silence was little short of amazing. Amazing was just the word. It was high time to found the community. Gauguin had returned and was lying ill in Pont Aven without money.

The white cloak that lay on Arles began to loosen and the townsman to thaw. Fortunately it took time. A sudden transition from the dusky sea of houses and buses and masses of people to the splendour of southern colour would have been insupportable. Arles was lovely, the squares, the Arlesian women, the Zouaves, the children, the hippopotamic priest in his surplice, even the brothels. The beauty here was overwhelming, and he slunk about like a Protestant in a cathedral during High Mass. What had he, from the north, to do with this riot of colour? His journey seemed to him a preposterous intrusion. He hardly dared to touch anything.

Curiously enough what he saw before him did not seem altogether new. He had seen it all in the Japanese prints, not in detail, but he had seen this gaily coloured clarity of atmosphere which was so different from the northern sobriety. There was the Japan of his dreams, lucid and simple. In fact he had painted such a landscape already, or tried to. His own view of Impressionism or some such theory had driven him to the palette of these prints, but it seemed artificial in the unsuitable conditions of the north. The snow melted, and the almond trees began to bloom. A new landscape unfolded itself before his eyes that demanded this very palette if it was to be painted in its naked truth. Every day nature added a new treasure of colour; everything budded here ten times as fast as in the north. The rapid growth of Arles mocked his tentative search for the right tones. The mistral swept the plain, the rocks in the distance shimmered and the earth revealed a prodigal

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wealth. In Arles the first green of spring was the signal for a gigantic orchestra to start its overture with a fanfare. An immeasurable sky bent above him and shone into the farthest crevice, into the darkest corner of every one's heart. The atmosphere took a load off his shoulders, and he moved as if borne along by wings instead of vulgar shoe leather. He laughed once more and the heavy grooves of his face became radiant.

He began to paint. What else could he do? Painting was the only possibility, especially here, for if he ceased to paint the glory of the countryside would smother him. Outside the gates the blossom stood in rows of pink and white fountains. The air was thick with stars of pink and white and heavy laden with the scent of almond blossom. The trees formed long white tunnels which dissolved in the shimmering distance and melted into the rising mountains. A breath of air held this magic spectacle in suspense. There was a luminosity in the atmosphere that not only did not blur the impenetrable wonder, but actually gave edge to the tiniest details. The smallest leaf hung in the air clear like a suspended letter of the alphabet. The foaming glory of bloom was caught up in the twisted branches as if they were brown muscular arms, and every separate blossom in the foam shone like a star at night.

Vincent painted ten pictures of the flowery gardens of Arles in as many days. He considered his paintings not a thousandth part as fair as what he had seen, but regarded objectively, they were not so bad, they were a beginning. If he could work like that for a few years he might achieve something. But he could not wait a few years, only a few days, if he wanted to catch the almond-blossom. In a week it would all be gone. He dare not pause for a moment, and rushed early in the morning to the Gates of Arles. The inhabitants stared curiously as this red-haired creature raced past them.

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At night, when he returned, he was exhausted and ravenous and swallowed his food. He had to feed well to paint like that, and not drink too much, although he could have gulped buckets-full. The brothel was no good either, for his blood had to flow quietly. Painting really required the health of a bull, and as none of the Impressionists of the *petit boulevard* could boast such health, art suffered. In bygone days artists were healthy people.

At this time he painted the drawbridge near Arles, with the yellow cart and the washerwomen by the stream. The canvas simply smiles at you, and there is already something of the south in it as well as a touch of Parisian spirit. Perhaps he would dedicate the picture to Teersteege in gratitude for his kind answer to Vincent's letter. Theo had really sent one of his early garden pictures to Mauve's widow, and Teersteege had taken the trouble to write a line in its praise. Such a success was not to be underestimated, and there was now some hope of winning his support for the new community.

Vincent probably led a double existence in Arles. Perhaps everybody in similar circumstances would have done the same. His painting was a sensuous surrender to a strange form of nature, really a wild orgy. He was like a sailor who comes into contact with women for the first time after he has dreamt all kinds of ideal dreams about them as mothers and sisters, and then is suddenly confronted by feminine nature, not mothers and sisters, but paradise and damnation. Paris had been a different experience, for there a mental relationship was given and taken in daily exchange. Physiological demands were resolved into interminable conversation. Paris was art, which was his own subject, and was full of painters, who were his own colleagues. In Arles there were Arlesian men and women, mountains, the sky and colours—things that had



THE BLUE CART
QUILL DRAWING, WATER-COLOUR AND PASTEL

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to be accepted in silence. In Arles everything was still shapeless and unpainted. In a few hours the diligence took him to Saintes Maries on the Mediterranean, and on the way he passed through country that reminded him of Ruisdael. On the shore there were boats, which he at once proceeded to draw and paint. He thought of the picture of the *Barges* by Monet which Theo owned. He felt that if he just painted everything he would approach the heart of the country more nearly. The plain of Arles extended from the gates of the town to Mont Majour. Without its colour the plain reminded him of old Salomon Koninck.

Was it ever possible to substitute painting for life? Was such an existence not largely a pretty dream? Sometimes the sheer idea seemed to him a wild caprice. How had he stumbled upon the idea? None of the people whom he painted had ever thought of it. He hit on painting because he did not belong to these people. The normal course of action would have been to talk with these people, to share their work, to visit the brothels with them. But that life brought him nothing. Silence and painting constituted his external existence. During the evening he sat and read. Daudet's '*Tartarin*' was a suitable book; these good Gascon people little guessed what a *Tartarin* they had among them. He read Zola, the Goncourts, Maupassant, everything he could get hold of, Zola especially. Zola was his bread and butter. At night he devoured literature as he had devoured light and colour in the day, and he did it to counterbalance the strain of the day and to fill his exhausted brain again somehow. What had reading to do with life? Or else he wrote to Theo at the other end of the world about ideas that were never realized and realities without an idea in them. He wrote too of his eternal lack of money, his lack of colours and canvas, his frantic desire to paint more and more, which was ruining his brother and did not bring in a penny,

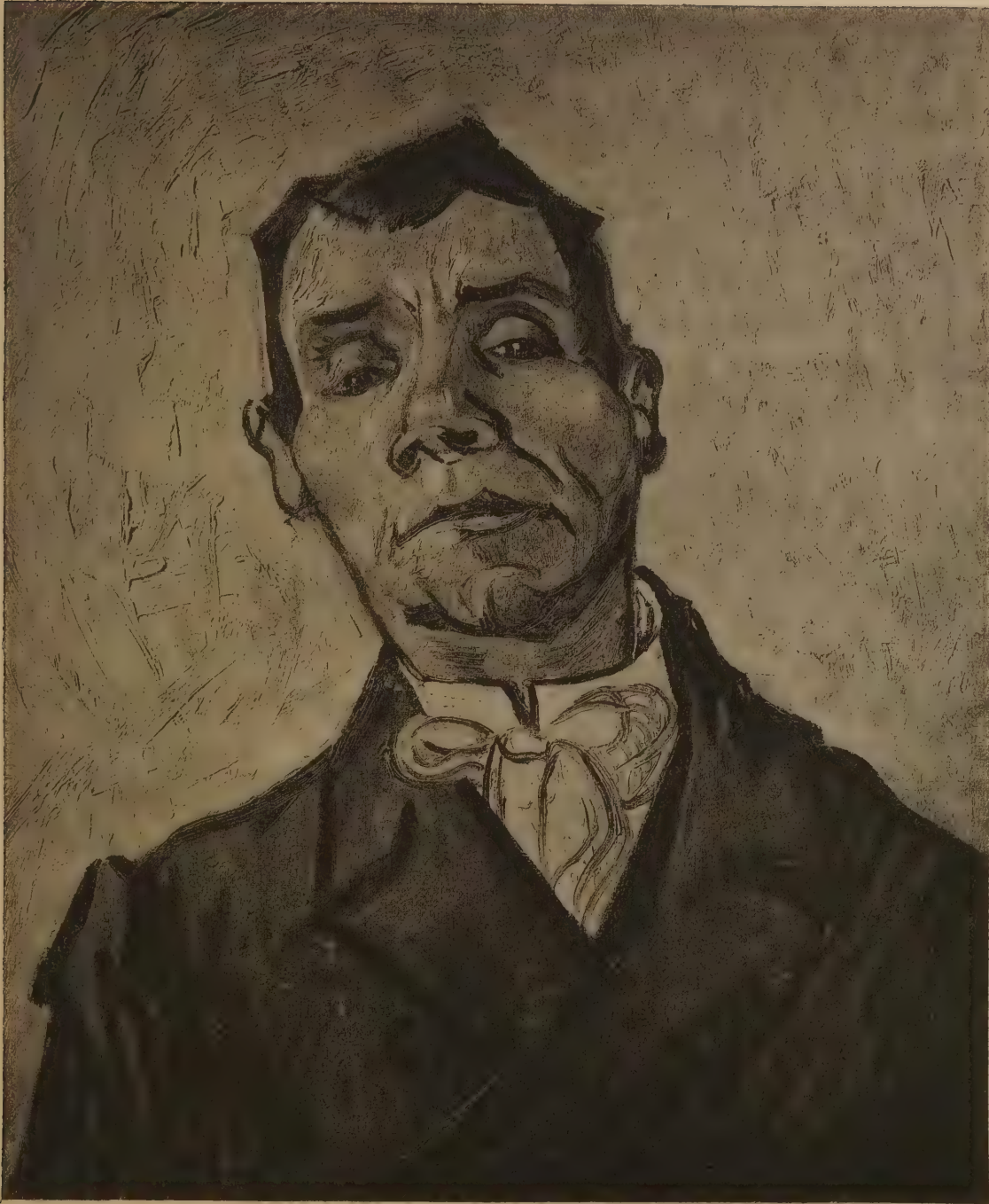
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but which drove him on irresistibly. His letters became a string of requests, although they were prompted by the desire to give. Sometimes he was so tired at night that the words of his letters danced on the paper before his eyes. What had writing letters to do with life? Yes, he talked to the postman, a charming fellow whom he painted, and there was also a lieutenant in the Zouave regiment, a small friendly chap with a neck like a bull and the eyes of a tiger. Milliet was his name, and he painted him, for painting was Vincent's method of speech. Roulin, the kindly postman, sat for him as often as he could and became his friend, the only friend Vincent ever had except Theo.

He said a good deal in his pictures. His colours were as clear-cut as brief questions and answers, and the words flew to and fro on his canvas. Whether Theo gained anything by it or not there was life in the pictures. Perhaps they contained a different life from that in the houses of the little town, weaker and less simple, but to give them up meant giving up art. Or was his passionate painting something other than the activity generally referred to as art?

Sometimes he inclined to this view because he was carried away, could not resist his impulse, and never thought while he painted. Occasionally he felt it absurd to call such efforts an activity at all. Was there too little of the animal or too little of the artist in him? A man like Courbet would have adapted himself to such new surroundings with a playful ease. Courbet therefore was the real master. What had Gauguin called him? A hand without a head, a painting machine! Was he too a painting machine?

He wrestled with art as with a deadly sin. It would have been more decent to go to a brothel, and more sensible too. When the sun had gone down he forced himself to take stock of his work. He discovered this



PORTRAIT OF AN ACTOR

1888

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patch of colour which he might lighten, that stroke he could strengthen, but he could only do it if he could feel that unifying rhythm which he could no more control now than when he had painted the Père Tanguy. Though he could not control this dynamic rhythm, it pleased him when it had taken shape, for it seemed to be the most organic factor in his canvas. What eluded him was the relation between this organic rhythm and the brain whose hand produced it. He resolved to be careful and to place each stroke as deliberately as he used to in Nuenen or Drenthe; he determined to co-ordinate his rhythm to his will. It was his last thought at night. But the first ray of the sun which woke him brought the old impulse in all its strength back again. All day he was but the servant of his eye, the slave of his hand. What a miraculous country, with its golden sheen and its incomparable luminosity! Van Gogh had waited for these things too long already, and had starved while he waited, nor had he even known why. He saw no finished shape before his vision, but Nature raised to a higher potentiality, to an insatiable yellow. Wherever he turned he was driven, torn by overwhelming beauty. Nothing could keep him back. Before him was not the impenetrable work of human hands or human minds, but blossoming trees.

The difficulties before Vincent were immense. He felt the burden without seeing it. As a thinker, he was a disciple of Rembrandt and of Delacroix; as a painter, which he had become as the result of profound self-tuition and experience, he was a naturalist of the first water. He possessed a number of undeveloped intellectual aspirations, which might have stood him in good stead, but he put them on one side because he regarded such means as impure. The members of Pissarro's circle regarded as literary all painting which was not directly derived from

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Nature. Van Gogh followed their practice of painting visually as if it were one of the Ten Commandments. In fact he was not conscious of an alternative.

Herein lay the suffering of Van Gogh the individual. What had driven him out of Paris if not the desire for spiritual experience, and the quest after forms to express such an experience? The sensuous magic that sharpened the wit of the Parisians had surfeited him. And now he was faced by charm raised to its zenith, innocent of all the obstacles of Parisian scepticism. This overpowering charm was ultimately even more sensuous perhaps, but to Van Gogh, spiritual; it was the source of all French magic, the cradle of the race, and its exquisiteness tortured him. Spring here called for poetry, the countryside was filled with an ancient wealth, here the sun let men live and die. The inhabitants really ought to have worn Greek garments, their eyes were mirrors of an antique faith. What could Van Gogh contribute to the wonder of this spell? The prose of a Courbet or a Manet, a theory about blotches, a colour analysis—tools untouched by any magic.

Herein too lay the blessing for Van Gogh the artist. As he could only produce prose he had to penetrate more deeply than any one else had done before him. His eyes bit into every object, into trees and soil, like an axe. He kneaded the ephemeral air into a solid mass to create an equivalent to the magic. As everything was yellow, he had to paint yellow, but so that you could taste, hear, smell and touch it. He painted till he made the stones talk.

Now the struggle began. He had already acquired a style. His necessity invented a shorthand script instead of shapes and forms; in the process he had to discard the very last rags of superfluous manner. He painted like a man who, surprised by robbers, makes a fortress of his



THE CHAIR AND THE PIPE

1888

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bedroom. He bent the nearest object into a shield and used the next one as his weapon. Van Gogh's need enriched his powers of improvisation. His oppressed self-consciousness rallied the forces of every experience. His style was the product of his Paris flower pieces, his weavers from Nuenen, his peasants in Drenthe, but his latest acquisition, Impressionism, left the strongest traces. And the result resembled his earlier work as an event resembles the epic which immortalizes it. A tree painted by Vincent in Paris or Holland did not resemble the tree in its totality but was rather an incident, comparable only to its bark, its roots, or its branches. A tree painted by Vincent in Arles was like the life in a human face; it was so placed that had it been left out you could imagine nothing else in its place, just as you take the emphasized line between two eyes for a nose. Organic function took the place of the object. He ceased to paint trees, but growth, tree-like existence; not blossoms, but bloom. His drawings, mastered with incredible patience, used to be merely descriptive, and now became a monumental cohesion, which announced incomparably more important complexes. His trees became possibilities which might give birth to a hundred other organisms. The stroke of his brush, which had hitherto been a skilful instrument mastered by sheer determination, now became an organic entity with a life of its own, and the palette he had wearily acquired burst into flames.

In Paris Van Gogh might have been described as a lyrical poet with occasional spontaneous inspirations; the sun of Arles made him the dramatist of modern art. This dramatic quality is his to such a degree that it has given him a place apart in modern painting. Time, who allots to every man his appointed place, will for once be at pains to discover his position in order of merit. Vincent, who always attempted to be with

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others and like others, was more apart than any other man of his age. The solitary position he occupies will always be an argument against him, for such positions are always suspicious. Delacroix was a dramatist, and the later Courbet, also the early Cézanne. These three names suffice to show the range of meaning which may attach to this concept. As long as Delacroix lived, a dramatist in art was also a poet, for his muse forged the past into the present. Delacroix' vision embraced cosmic spheres. In Courbet's hands the dramatic quality was narrowed down to heighten his personality. *The Wave* in the Louvre is not only the strongest and the purest Courbet, but also his most ephemeral masterpiece. Cézanne attained his maturity by overcoming the dramatic element of his early dark legends. His individuality became more elusive as he exhausted it. Van Gogh, like Delacroix, had a tempest in his bosom, perhaps an even wilder tempest, perhaps an even more radiant 'sun in his head.' His super-dramatic gifts threatened to become physiological. He could achieve neither the self-mastery of Cézanne, nor could he pour his forces into the many and wide channels of Courbet, before he rose to the bold singularity of his masterpieces. On his own pinnacle there is room only for Van Gogh, no matter how many he has lured to follow him there. The drama of the man was predicted in his pictures. The tempest in the bosom of Delacroix was free from all physiological taint. His completed canvas is like the furioso of a Michael Angelo. Van Gogh fought against the painting machine that was in him, and longed for the cosmos of Delacroix. A more glowing heart never beat against the portals of humanity. He wanted to be a Delacroix, but from behind the portals all life had departed. The portals alone remained, though they seemed to beckon to him often. They opened upon chaos. And ultimately Vincent only saw with the

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vision of a Courbet. If he could see the visions of a Delacroix, or if Delacroix still lived, he would be his bond slave. Necessity made him into a Courbet, but a Courbet of heroism and tragedy. Necessity bent every stroke his brush ever set on canvas, and if it limited his art it intensified the artist; if it destroyed the bridge to Delacroix it destroyed every wall between ourselves and him. Much could be said against his pictures, but never that they could be different. Nothing was left but the crazy race to the summit, and this dramatic element can be claimed by no other master in this century of great art. We race along with him, breathless—whither? No matter, for we follow a man, a hero, perhaps the last!

For these reasons something must be deducted from Vincent's claim as a European artist. Van Gogh belongs, as its first member, to a new anarchic Europe for which he wanted to save all the fundamental qualities of the old masters. This desire ennobles the anarchist against his own volition and raises him above Courbet, who wanted to preserve the old masters' recipes. Van Gogh remained a Dutchman when his pictures had acquired a ponderous force hitherto unknown in the art of his fellow-countrymen, even when his eccentricity had broken through all the conventions peculiar to his quiet country. He remained a Dutchman, even in his colour. His work does not fit into any Dutch gallery, but no more do the old Dutchmen fit into the houses of modern Holland. The garden-houses of the seafaring people had long ago become familiar with the gay colouring of their colonies, and in their dwellings Van Gogh's bold contrasts rouse no incongruity. He was a Dutchman too in his incorruptibility of vision, which, even in the tumult of his strongest impressions in Arles, only dictated the portrayal of what was reality to him. He had the healthy naturalistic instincts and all the good

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characteristics of his race, but in a gigantically distorted form. Seeghers, the seventeenth-century etcher, may perhaps have been a spiritual relation of Vincent's on a small scale. The rudiments of Van Gogh's *écriture* may be found to an amazing degree in his work, and there are many others who have some trait that links them to Van Gogh. The last of them drew on the assiduously stored treasures, brought together by the vision of the minor Dutch painters of landscapes and interiors; in converting their hoard to his own uses, he also became the master of another kind of creative action. In this well-constructed action there is an element which only one other master of the Netherlands, incomparably greater than Vincent and all his other countrymen, has achieved. Rembrandt, by his dramatic force, raised Dutch art out of the world of craftsmanship, skill and good taste into the higher and wider realm which appeals to all human hearts, even those that possess neither beautiful interiors, nor education, nor good taste. He raised Dutch art into a domain where it becomes the Mercury of a development which passes the bounds of international and social progress. Van Gogh did almost the same thing for Impressionism. The forces Van Gogh struggled with were not of course such organic and such vital complexes as Rembrandt was faced by, but they were that peculiar conglomeration known as Impressionism, and it is strange enough that it fell to the lot of this man, who once seemed an *Ardappeleter* by profession, to unite the forces which constituted this conglomeration of French art. Whether he succeeded in enlarging it is another matter. Van Gogh's contribution was not nearly as unqualified as that of Rembrandt. But was this many-sided conglomeration really capable of enlargement? Could it be given anything but solidity and synthesis? The action of Van Gogh was, too, of a far less spiritual kind—and here the difference between the



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two Dutchmen widens into the gulf which divides two worlds—nor was it an exclusively personal achievement. If Rembrandt was the genius of a circle which he broke, Van Gogh was the servant of the idea which attempted to unite it again. He never regarded himself as anything but a vehicle for others' uses. In view of the means Van Gogh had at his disposal, we incline to regard his action as heroic. The finest element of his heroism was his wish to give a social significance to his deeds. Had Impressionism ever had a social meaning? The trick of the *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* was perhaps an effort in this direction, but at most one on the lines of Courbet's reaction, which was directed against a class, the bourgeois, for example, and never attempted to indicate a constructive ideal in place of its own destructive attack. And French art, after all, in spite of Daumier and Courbet, and in spite of the quiet opposition of the Barbizon group, continued on a higher level, and perhaps less consciously, in obedience to the bourgeois instincts of the minor Dutchmen of the seventeenth century. French art gave less to the public and risked everything to reach the ultimate heights of sensibility and intuition. Intuition had not yet become a weapon in the subsequent warfare against popular tradition, for the artistic aims of the painters predominated. The revolution of Monet and Pissarro, at that time far more complete than that of Renoir and Cézanne, whose sense of tradition was uppermost, confined itself to the means an artist employed. They fought for a lighter and more gaily coloured interpretation of Nature, a theory they supported by a more or less scientific doctrine. The really decisive subjective factor lost more and more of its importance. This subjective factor is really part of the means Monet and Pissarro strove to revolutionize. Their art was art for art's sake, or rather for the sake of the light and colour of the air. Such a doctrine is ultimately the best means

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to destroy all art. And even Manet's work, though a piece of bravery, was only comparable to a bold performance before a circle of satiated amateurs. Every battle against such cultured mannerisms seemed possible only by means of a violent breach with such art, and the process threatened everything personal and everything of value in the nineteenth century. People were ready to accept almost any superstition, just as in Holland after the zenith of Dutch art had passed. We can see the prelude to the collapse of our own day in the fevered activity of the *Indépendents* after Vincent left Paris.

Van Gogh, the revolutionary, saved the tradition of Impressionism, or whatever portion could and should be saved, just as the Impressionists had saved the tradition of the old masters. The little boulevard came to the rescue of the big one. But this help was destined to be of use to an even larger community. Every simple-minded creature possessed of sensibility was to benefit by understanding this form of art. Van Gogh's work was a simplification, not of isolated means, but of the whole modern complex. To Van Gogh the senses were the road to the soul. His simplification was not for art's sake alone, but for the sake of the whole of soulless and thirsting humanity.

More painting, more colour, so as to reveal the play of sensibility and of new life, was the cry of Courbet and Manet. But how could the oppressed and burdened of the community play with life?

'More drawing!' said Vincent, for by drawing you reconstruct the world that has been torn to pieces. You must draw, not according to some ancient dusty scheme of rules, but with the brush-strokes of the early Manet and Monet, who were inspired by Courbet seascapes. You must draw with the secret baroque of Delacroix. Colour was in its shape, luminous as the blue sky or red fruit, but its form was solid as



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metal. Let your brush revel in yellow, blue and orange. What eyes could resist the charm of such simple pleasures? Heighten your surfaces with the undulation of your brush, let them flutter like flags in the breeze, but master your colour with your drawing.

The pictures produced in Arles have a new flavour, they are richer. The Dutch ones savoured of earth; the new flavour seems to emanate from a certain structure of lines and from colour harmonies. The flavour is quite unprecedented. His very first still-life in Arles, the blue coffee service on the yellow ground, is full of it, although these enamelled blues are too hard against the yellow. The same flavour permeates his mature picture with the candlesticks, the onions, his pipe and tobacco, also the Gipsy Camp, and almost all the other landscapes produced in this fruitful summer. We are confronted by a phenomenon of taste, for they do not suggest any of the refined things that we are accustomed to honour as the height of good taste. Van Gogh does not exceed these canons by rising to an even higher level, but by an unexpected and improbable change of effect.

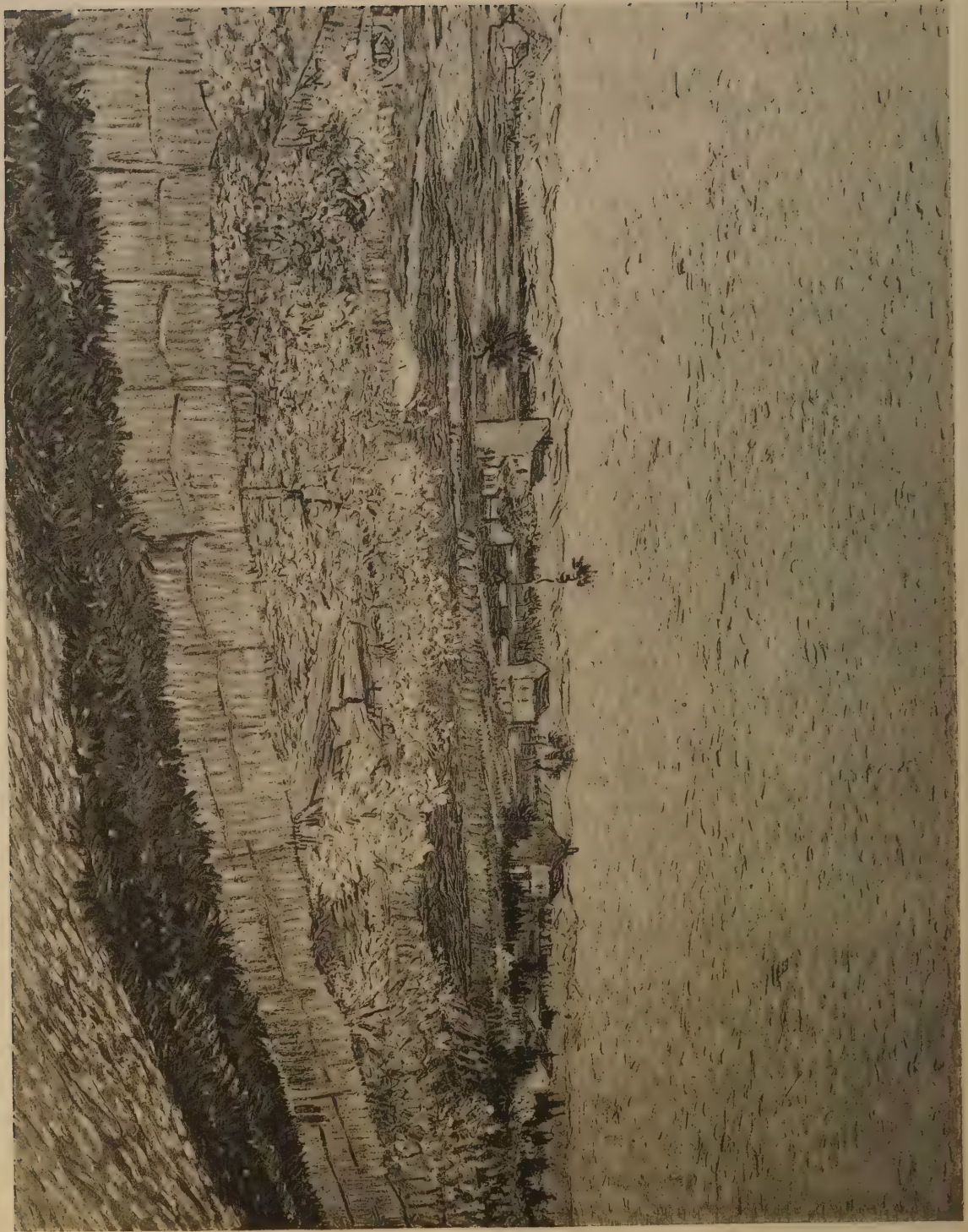
Was it possible for this creature from Drenthe, this proletarian *sans milieu*, who committed the most hair-raising breaches of taste in life, to show real taste in art? If he did, then so does the Serbian peasant in his embroidered linen smock. Vincent's colour harmonies are almost like traditional habits carried on from generation to generation without apparently any individual effort. His pictures look as if a whole nation of simple peasants had contributed simultaneously to his canvases, peasants who used his colour-scheme from an age-long tradition. If whatever other quality we feel in his colour is taste, it is related to other factors, stronger than himself, which carried him away and raised his work to an unusual level. The forces that are gathered together in the

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still-life with the onions radiate from the centre beyond the frame, and what seems to us good taste in the picture is not the tone of its colours, but the cohesion of these centrifugal forces which Van Gogh has bound together. What we call good taste in Van Gogh is a phenomenon diametrically opposed to the usual concept; it is the surprising fact, now grown visible, that onions, candlesticks, pipes and tobacco can in certain circumstances possess action of their own, that they can have unheard of relations to one another and to ourselves. The good taste displayed in the picture is the pathos of its objects. If we perceived not onions, but a hero, Danton or Brutus, we would be careful not to describe this glowing pathos as good taste, and we do so in this case because we strive in vain to find the explanation of why we are moved so deeply, and so we seize upon the least adequate concept merely because it lies near at hand. It would be more appropriate to judge the passions of a painted Danton or Brutus by the canons of good taste, because a competent painter would probably create a peaceful still-life out of the stirring heroes of a revolution.

Van Gogh exalted and dramatized Nature. His demon roused the object which had slept in the hands of the old Dutch still-life painters. Impressionism as such only succeeded in cleansing it without destroying its traditional semblance to reality. Van Gogh's irresistible force created a new pictorial reality. His taste consisted of his ability to let his onions remain onions, in spite of the emotional force he gave them; in fact his onions are more essentially onions, because the accident that hurled them into his canvas revealed the organic potentiality of their substance.

It is not difficult to find comparable examples of a kindred taste in the history of art. The portrait of 'L'Arlésienne' is like an actor's head by



LANDSCAPE NEAR ARLES
1888

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Sharaku. Van Gogh would undoubtedly have appreciated Sharaku more than any other Japanese painter, if he knew his work. But Vincent's kinship with Sharaku fails to suggest the demon in the European painter. Van Gogh's demoniacal naturalism is about as near to Sharaku as Eastern Asia to Europe. We could paper our walls delightfully with a Japanese effect, and what we enjoy first of all is the easily applicable element of bold Japanese designs on their silvery background. In addition Sharaku's faces please us, for we can just perceive their suppressed emotion. The Japanese method can also be applied to European art, especially if this art is either not sure enough or too sure of its Europeanism. Degas applied this method slowly, Whistler rapidly, and Van Gogh, at any rate in his most harmonious pictures left it out. Sharaku added a certain exaggeration to the conventions of his countrymen, and thereby gave a new power to Japanese rhythm. Degas contributed a special anatomy, which was a reflection of modern psychology and modern manners. All these artists contributed industry, care and even sensibility to their work, and they succeeded in stirring a similar emotion in the spectator, but none of their contributions produce growth and progress. Van Gogh produced a vital tension. The whole course of his evolution seems, up to this point, to have aimed at dragging the tension that was always in him to the surface, where it touches a fuse and then explodes. His painting is comparable to burning guncotton. The flames resemble radiant gardens, flaming trees, chasing clouds, glowing suns. By comparison, the Paris flower pieces, in which the glow first showed, look like hothouse plants. We enjoy these flames in his carefully dominated baroque, in his curiously curved arabesques which we take for onions, candlesticks and tobacco. We rush to interpretation with the violence of these flames. Perhaps there are as many

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interpretations to be found in Sharaku, and Degas contains matter for a host of them, but nothing urges us to their interpretation, for the violent flames are lacking. This motive is so strong in 'L'Arlésienne' that I once inquired about Van Gogh from an old woman, who could be no other than his model, in the small café on the Place Lamartine in Arles, twenty years after Vincent's death. We talked about him as if he had just left the table and was coming back again shortly. In one of the two versions of this picture the tension is a trifle weaker, although in composition and in colour it resembles the other closely, and its decorative element immediately represses our impulse to interpretation. We are faced almost by a Sharaku.

There is nothing new in Van Gogh's method, and the attempt to ascribe the invention of a new theory to him, such as Expressionism, is to debase the artist. His method is the method of Rembrandt, Rubens, Greco, Delacroix, raised to a demoniacal pitch, because he spent his art upon a table with tobacco, candlesticks and onions, because this romanticist with the hurricane in his bosom turned the Pegasus of contemplation into a war-horse, because this Don Quixote fought for the fiery emblem of his spirit with sunflowers and peach blossoms. The contrast between the old world and the new has never appeared more drastic or moved us so much.

As the summer drew on with the intensity of its life throbbing in every blade of grass, Van Gogh revealed himself in all his nakedness. He painted as in a trance, intoxicated by the south, and as if the brilliant colouring acted like whip and spur to his senses, because the light had been denied to his race from the day of its inception. He felt Nature standing above him, and it seemed as if he were not painting the pictures, but as if the sun throbbed and beat on his brush, as the blood

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throbbed and beat in his veins. His agony was due perhaps to the fact that he was conscious of the demon in him, whom he served, and whose northern extraction forbade him to surrender to the ecstasy of the south.

In the midst of his wild enjoyment of his work, he guessed the insufficiency of his creation and he experienced Hyperion's desire for other joys. What he did was not real life. 'It would be less costly to bring children into this world.' Would it not be better to be with others? Certainly more healthy. His body suffered from many years of starvation. He continued to live very simply, although he chose his food with greater care. 'I have to live as if I were suffering already from a serious nervous complaint. . . . Most important of all is not to do anything silly, to be tempted by women or real life!' Paris had done him harm. In Paris he had blamed Drenthe, in Drenthe, La Borinage. Perhaps there had been too much drink in Paris. Now he painted more and drank less, but it hardly improved matters. Theo complained too, quite frequently. The doctor said there was something wrong with his heart, but he probably meant his head. There was something wrong with everybody's head. Art is to blame, your brain goes to pieces, but art flourishes.

In order to have a home for his pictures he rented half of an empty house in the Place Lamartine. The house was yellow outside and white inside, and the floor was covered with gorgeous red tiles. The rent was fifteen francs a month, but he simply could not leave his pictures for ever in his hideous room at the inn. In the house they looked splendid against the white walls. He would like to have lived in the house, but that meant buying furniture. He had the doors and the window-frames painted white, and that cost another ten francs. The effect was magnificent, only it was a shame of course that Theo might have spent it on a

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holiday to get better, especially now that he had to help Gauguin, who was starving in Pont Aven. The best solution was really to let Gauguin come to Arles. Two together spend only a little more than one if things are managed the right way. There was room enough in the house; they could cook their own food. . . . If Gauguin did not like the idea he might tell Bernard or one of the others. There really ought to be a whole colony of artists in Arles, who lived and worked together like the old Dutch painters. Of course the colony might also be in Brittany, and he was quite ready to go there at once, only of course the south had advantages—light and colour. If the future produced a great master he was sure to be a colourist.

In no time Vincent had produced another scheme, a continuation of the community he had wanted to found the year before. Vincent had, as a matter of fact, never really abandoned the original scheme, and he exchanged pictures regularly with his friends, with the result that Theo had quite a collection of the works *du petit boulevard*. This exchange however was a pure matter of business, and he was now concerned with something altogether different. He was convinced that by working together new values might be attained, far richer, more general and more useful than if the one toiled in Pont Aven, the other in Arles and the third in Paris. Apart from the fact that such a communal existence would really lend meaning to a painter's life, it would also obviate the necessity of playing the clown among the Arlesian peasantry. Vincent cautiously began to prepare his brother for his new idea, although he was silent on what was to Vincent the most vital element, his burning personal necessity. He wrote to Theo about painting and the practical advantages of the scheme. He threw out wild hints to Gauguin at the same time. Gauguin did not care a fig about Arles; he would sooner be



MONT MAJOUR

1888

Happiness in Arles

surrounded by a herd in Pont Aven, provided he did not die of hunger, and he was planning a scheme for Paris, art-dealing on an enormous scale, with half a million of money and himself as manager. Vincent waited patiently, he would not dream of interfering with Gauguin's scheme in any way. Perhaps it was even immodest of him to have suggested such an idea to an artist like Gauguin.

In the meantime he lived on ship biscuit for a few weeks, because his models ran away with so much money. He only paid them their meals, but even that mounted up. Roulin, the postman with a head like Socrates, liked to sit to him. Roulin was a splendid creature and a revolutionary. When he sang the Marseillaise, Vincent could have fancied he was living through 1789, and he thought of Daumier. If he could have afforded it he would have painted only men like Roulin. The human body afforded him the strongest means of expression, especially people like the postman, with whom he stood in close relation, or, for instance, Gauguin. His portraits made him realize that he owed much more to the ideas of Delacroix than to those of the Impressionists. His powerful colouring, his haphazard methods, his not at all haphazard sensibility and vision, were not like the Impressionists, and were more and more divorced from their *pointillism*. Of course he divided his surfaces as they did to make them luminous, but without in any way following a theory, and he gathered his colour with powerful strokes where the drawing demanded it. The Impressionists used colour as a description for Nature, not exclusively of course—every one had his own palette—but half of it served this purpose, while real painting only required the other half. For Vincent colour was the spring-board from which he vaulted over Nature; local colour provided him with his start. He painted a head of somebody whom he liked, for instance, as true to

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Nature as possible, fair or brown as the case might be. 'Then comes the really important part, the wilful heightening of the colour scheme. Blonde hair is raised to orange, then to chrome, or even pale lemon colour. Then the stupid wall behind the head is taken away and a simple background of rich blue extends to infinity. And with a simple combination of two rich colours it is possible to give luminosity to a head, as mysterious as a star in the azure sky.' Of course he could not do that every time, and he could not paint a Parisian bounder in that way. He had started to paint the Père Tanguy in this fashion, because Tanguy's appreciation of not at all bourgeois delights made him, too, into a kind of revolutionary, and Vincent was fond of him. When he painted this portrait he had not dared to follow his impulse altogether as Delacroix had done, but he had followed Monet's methods. He wanted to get to a point at which his own relation to his original was defined by the use of his colour, which necessitates a close acquaintance with the model. And for this reason it would be an excellent thing to have people about you, Gauguin, for instance. Gauguin could deliver a picture a month to Theo in exchange for his keep in Arles. It would be rather expensive for Theo, but twelve pictures a year by Gauguin were not to be despised. Gauguin might not want to be so far away from Paris, for he belonged to the group that still hoped for success. Vincent had given up the idea of success long ago. But whether Gauguin would come or not, it would be as well to get the house ready so that he could sleep in it and be able to put up a friend. Living in hotels and eating in cafés did not agree with Vincent at all. There are bohemians who would enjoy such a life, but a working man must have some place of his own. Cafés were poison to any one who inclined to sinister thoughts; hence the wild colours in his 'Night Café': 'To show that it is a place where you



LEMONS

1888

Happiness in Arles

might go mad or commit a crime . . . with a subterranean atmosphere, suffering and darkness which haunt you in your bed at night.'

Theo inherited a small sum from his uncle in the Hague, which he spent on Gauguin and on fitting up the house in Arles. Vincent bought white kitchen chairs and a solid white-wood table which looked splendid with the white walls, and put this furniture in the studio room with the gorgeous red-tiled floor. A large number of portraits were nailed up on the walls, some of Vincent's, but especially other people's. Theo was to continue to exchange as many pictures as possible. Anybody who wanted a picture could have one or two in exchange for a self-portrait. Such a studio with a series of painters' portraits was very jolly. 'It will have a character *à la Daumier*, and I dare to prophesy that it will not be banal.' But the best room of all was the guest chamber, which contained a peasant bed of walnut wood. It was a double bed, because a double bed looked somehow more restful and solid and peaceable. He hung up his 'Sunflowers' opposite the bed. He managed to buy a white bedstead for himself, secondhand, which he thought of decorating. He would paint the figure of a woman on one side, or perhaps a cradle. He spent four hundred francs on furnishing the house, and it would be a pity if no one was going to occupy the guest-room. Theo could at any rate spend his holidays there. Gauguin of course would only come if it was to his advantage to do so. There was no harm in that, a great artist could suit his own convenience, but if Vincent acted in such a way it would be another matter. Above all, Gauguin was not to be pressed to come; the best plan was to let him go his own way. He could, however, be sure of one thing, and that was that he would not find a better friend anywhere else. The time was perhaps ripe to ask: 'Are you coming or not?'

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This period was the happiest time of Vincent's life. His little yellow house gave him a sense of security. If Gauguin would not come, somebody was sure to pass through Arles every now and again and spend a night with him. Even if no stray travellers turned up, there would be others after him to whom he would leave the house, people who would continue the work he had done there and who would do it better. Continuation mattered more than anything else. If he painted awkwardly and badly—Vincent had no illusions—he would hand on a roof to abler successors. The house was a real artist's home for people who had no place in the world. For in these days art had grown superfluous, and would not exist much longer. Only fragments stirred here and there. And for how long?

By a happy chance Theo had just been to Bing's attic and acquired a number of fine Japanese prints which would decorate the house magnificently. The yellow home was to be a small Japan, an island. He would lead the quiet existence of the great Hokusai, and any one who entered would see at once that only peaceful work was done there.

Once the hope of having a wife and children had spurred him on. Now his energy was increased by the prospect of sharing his house and his work with others. Gauguin wrote he would bring a few others with him. The more the merrier! The yellow house would soon become the great studio of the South, with Gauguin at the head of it. His joy overflowed into his pictures and his colours sang. He painted day and night, and lived on bread and coffee to save his money for his work. The mistral was particularly malicious that year, and while it blew he could not leave the house, but he did not waste a second.

He painted his pictures of the local park. The park was close to his house. The park was like a garden that poets dreamed of, not the work



VINEYARDS
1868

Happiness in Arles

of any gardener. The oleander was still in bloom, and there were veritable fountains of blossoms. As soon as a bloom faded ten new ones appeared. The cedars and cypresses added their powerful green. He had to paint the park just as it grew and blossomed, and to exaggerate the effect if possible, not the trees and the plants, but their wild riot of colour, and at the same time the picture must preserve the solemnity of the cypress trees. Pairs of lovers wandered about on the pink paths; they fitted admirably into the scene.

A whole cycle was created here called the 'Poet's Garden,' for he could fancy that southern poets like Dante, for instance, had their visions in such gardens. The cycle was to be hung in Gauguin's room, for he was bound to arrive soon. The pair on the edge of the wood belonged to the cycle; two people, a luminous chord made with three strokes and painted with his fist—blue, yellow and pink—in front of a row of burning cypress trees. He linked the human forms to the landscape simply by his rhythm, not as Courbet did who added one element to the other, but organically, as Vincent thought Monticelli painted landscapes and figures, with one impulse. He despaired of recapturing Monticelli's adorable magic, which resembled the amorous droning of bees in the shade. He supposed that he needed a lighter heart, and that he ought to have tasted the honey instead of carrying with him in his heart the image of forbidden fruit.

The progressive continuity Vincent believed in was achieved. Van Gogh lightened the heavy impasto of Monticelli, substituted clear structure for Monticelli's vague vibrations, and symphony for his droning bees. Vincent's hard struggle led him miles beyond the retrograde performances of his beloved Monticelli. He lacked that amorous charm which was in reality much too insignificant for him, but he possessed

Vincent van Gogh

instead a nobler consciousness of humanity. At this time Van Gogh had sinister thoughts, as always. He fought with all his might to exclude the trace of them from his pictures, and saved them up for his leisure hours, when the mistral blew. Above the goal towards which he strove there shone high in the sky a star to which he raised his eyes in secret: the genius of the man with the hurricane in his bosom and the sun in his head. In Delacroix he found the secret of that order which tames the wild confusion of unruly impulse. His fondest hope was to be master of his little field as Delacroix was of all the world. Delacroix' colour flowed like fiery lava from a crater, but a miraculous system of canals spread his colour all over his canvas. Vincent surrendered himself as completely as the great Master to his impressions, but whereas the vision of Delacroix was fed by many sources and demanded therefore a richer mind to control them, the impressions of Van Gogh emanated from a single source; for this reason they flow forth with a proportionate violence. The methods were more primitive, the canals, which Van Gogh spread over his pictures, were wider and arranged more hastily. You can see his haste—like a man setting his house in order when Death is knocking at the door. There is an element of madness in the way Van Gogh surrendered to his sensibility, and of violence in his reflection. It is a miracle that he brings his forces to success, but he hardly ever failed at this time. He painted with 'the blindness and the clairvoyance of a lover.' The amorous couples in his pictures increased. The ringing tones of the colour of their clothes suggest that they love each other. In the South everybody was in love—provided there were two of them. Milliet, the lieutenant in the Zouave regiment, always had as many Arlesian ladies about him as he wanted, so much so that he was almost bored with them. On the other hand, of course, he

Happiness in Arles

could not paint them. Vincent painted them, but it was the only approach he made to them.

Autumn began to assume its colours. There were more and more new yellows, and the vines spilt their red blood. He wanted neither to sleep nor to eat, but merely to look at the world. His eyes could hardly bear the strain. Sometimes he longed to shut himself up in a dark room to write letters and to rest his eyes. His pictures were festivals of harvest in the vineyards and in the fields. His colours fell from his palette like ripe fruit from the tree. He needed a thousand hands to paint with, and he longed sometimes for the density of the idler, for it would have prolonged the glory.

Gauguin seemed depressed and dissatisfied with his work, and still ill. He wrote he would come as soon as he could. He had written that for the tenth time. He sent his portrait instead, which revealed a colourless, neglected, sinister face. Vincent could have screamed in anger at the folly of people who were ill in the North and lacked the energy to recover their health in the South. If only Gauguin would not stay in Pont Aven! Perhaps he would never come. People were lazy; Vincent had never felt such a mastery over his energy. The little yellow house became fuller and fuller of radiant pictures, and it was due to the South. How else could he explain his progress since he left Paris? He wrote and told Theo so in every letter. He wanted to recommend every painter, no matter who he was or where he came from, to try the prescription to which Delacroix, Monticelli, Renoir and Cézanne had owed their health. It was this light without shadows, the warmth, the simple people, the food and the wine, all of which might have a very different complexion elsewhere, or to a different mood. But the best thing of all was the yellow house, with its white rooms and red-tiled

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floors. Who could tell whether the yellow house was not more important than Arles and the whole Provence?

The house at any rate helped to give his painting a new direction. At first he nailed up the pictures that looked well on the white walls, and then it occurred to him one day to paint a cycle specially for the house. It consisted of fifteen pictures of equal size. The series was not intended to be a sequence in the narrower sense of the word, but there was to be some sort of connecting link between all the pictures. They were conceived like the four pictures of the 'Poet's Garden' and formed a group, each picture being an entity in itself, but fitted into the rhythm of the series. Once he was out of doors he forgot his immediate intention, but he remembered instinctively the image of the yellow house with its white walls, the 'home of art' for others. This latent consciousness tamed his impulse, widened the violence of his vision, and emphasized his rhythm. He was subject to other restraining influences and impulses at the same time. Delacroix was ever at his elbow, and the vision of a faery Japan shimmered like a mirage over the landscape. It was as if these forces made a path along which he travelled, after his own peculiar impulse had set his work in motion. And now Vincent understood several things that Seurat had told him, which at the time had seemed only the sudden flash of light in the alcoholic fog of his nights in Paris. He suddenly realized the meaning of the word 'decoration.' Seurat had made his search for a new democratic style the substance of his rationalism. Seurat lacked nothing but the essential flaming image. He perceived the necessity for action, he possessed the implements and the materials for the construction of a community, but he lacked the convincing experience and the fundamental faith on which his new church could be built. He was a primitive like Van Gogh, in some



A STREET IN ARLES

1888

Happiness in Arles

respects perhaps even more primitive, and certainly too primitive in his seclusion from the world. Seurat was a noble being, kindly and virtuous, but he did not possess the associative impulse. He could have made his dots in any corner of the globe; he was a scholar and a specialist. The Japanese, whom Vincent dreamed of, would have counted Seurat as one of themselves far more readily than Van Gogh, but Van Gogh did possess the associative impulse. It was the Alpha and the Omega of his life, his joy, his motive and his destiny. It had driven him through various peoples and countries, through various professions, and it drove him on now to enlarge the boundaries of his present occupation. It led him to decoration, if it should prove to be a suitable path to the community and to humanity. The search of such seekers is always unconscious. If they were conscious of their search they would never find anything worth looking for. They serve their longing as others serve their employers, and they fail to notice that they no longer control the form of activity they believe themselves to have chosen. Vincent was most surprised to recognize decorative possibilities in his painting; it had never occurred to him to see in this development the inevitable evolution of his natural impulse. And for this very reason he produced more than mere ornamentation. Decoration was to Van Gogh nothing but the externalization of his activity, and it retained its dramatic quality in every line. Accustomed to attribute every step forward to the help of others, he wrote letters of glowing gratitude to Theo, who had given him the yellow house. The house had helped and guided him in his work, and he requested that Seurat should be told how often he thought of him, and how indebted he felt towards him. He suggested to Theo that he ought to buy all the important works by Seurat for their community, and pay not less than five thousand francs for each picture.

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Van Gogh never suggested that he might find his way to decoration along a road which went in the opposite direction to Seurat's path. Seurat had aimed at something of the kind, and that was quite sufficient. His cup of gratitude was full to overflowing.

He might also have remembered his own feeble efforts, such as his drawing called 'Sorrow,' the naked woman who illustrated misery, and which was decorative in a very cheap way. At the time he made this drawing his sensibility was not less impassioned, but the contrast between his sensibility and his form was as banal as possible. The evolution of Van Gogh is the history of his effort to master this contrast. His success was not achieved by any lessening of his sensibility, or by applied rationalism of any kind, but by the growth of his spiritual forces. His sensibility rose from the depths of an imagined life to such a height, where he maintained it with the utmost exertion, that all his failings slipped from off it like mud, and left bare the solid masses of a rhythmic structure. Seurat dreamed of organized ornamentation, and hoped for the day when he might mechanically construct new legends suitable for wall spaces. He believed that he might be able to substitute physical speculations for the eclecticism of Puvis de Chavannes and his own classical tradition. He was a new type of academician, milder and more intelligent than the old variety, but his substance was old wine in new bottles. Van Gogh never speculated. His faith was that if he painted what his vision saw in men and in trees, and if he let his sun glow like a red ball of flame, made his clouds chase, cut into sods like a plough, in fact if he painted as he felt, he must be right, and the result might possibly be decorative as well. Even decoration was nothing but expression raised to a certain level.

Van Gogh's new trend brought new qualities to light in his work.



THE SOWER (AFTER MILLET)

1888

Happiness in Arles

While he was working at his series of fifteen pictures he painted the bridge of Trinquetaille and the street-tunnel under the railway. Both these pictures were painted without reference to the palette he had chosen for his series for the house and without the least idea of decoration. These pictures seem to contain a formula of unheard of power for the cold, straight-laced elegance of this era of machinery. Van Gogh's railway bridge possessed the new style that we dream of for modern architecture, and as a matter of fact the decorative charm of many of his pictures can be traced directly to their architectural form. In some of his pictures of olive-orchards the intertwined trees resemble the structure of northern columns. His quadrangular fields have the air of plans for immense halls. His picture of his Spartan bedroom with its heavy-footed furniture on the straight-lined floor has the pomp of a primitive temple. His palette gave a scintillating vitality to his yellows, violets, blues, greens, crimsons, scarlets. All that he prayed for in his temple was sung by his colours.

When he knew definitely that Gauguin was coming he had gas laid on, and he sacrificed half his month's allowance in order to complete the furniture in the guest chamber. The four pictures of the 'Poet's Garden' hung in real frames on the white walls. Theo could not help making a mild criticism. The installation in the yellow house and the ever-increasing expenses for colours and canvas had made a large hole in his pocket. And this time Vincent even failed to evince his usual contrition for his wild extravagance. It had cost a heap of money, but it was worth it. For the first time he could look at his work and judge of it. Something had been achieved in the last eight months. Where was the *pointillist*, the Paris gabbler, the sick man, the Paris tippler and pessimist? It had cost a lot of money, but he had a lot to show for it.

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And he was only about to make his real start. After having got over the worst by himself, everything would be child's play when two of them were working together. The harvest had never been so rich. Grapes weighing pounds hung in clusters on the vines, and there was barely enough room to store the olives. Autumn was aflame in all its coloured glory, and the yellow house stood in its midst like a vat in a vineyard.

End of Vol. I



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